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# THE NEW YORKER



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# THE NEW YORKER

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**RACHEL AVIV** ("YOUR SON IS DECEASED," P. 36) has been a staff writer since 2013.

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# THE MAIL

## BABY TALK

Margaret Talbot's article contains much of the current thinking about the value of immersing babies and toddlers in language ("The Talking Cure," January 12th). Encouraging parents and caregivers to talk more to their babies more often is certainly important, but we must also consider how to expand upon the limited vocabularies of many caregivers. One solution is to read picture books. In the psychology department at the University of California, Santa Cruz, we recently carried out a large replication of a classic study showing that print has a richer vocabulary than speech. We found that the variety of words in picture books was more extensive than that of parents talking to their children. Picture books were three times as likely as child-directed speech to use a word that isn't among the most common English words; this result was found regardless of parents' social class. Even the language quality of two adults talking to each other fell below that of picture books. Given the fact that word mastery in adulthood is correlated with early acquisition of words, a potentially powerful leveller of family wealth and class may be as simple as engaging in picture-book reading with babies.

*Dom Massaro*  
*Santa Cruz, Calif.*

I'm a pediatrician who works in a clinic that serves mostly Medicaid patients, and at routine checkups my colleagues and I stress the importance of reading, singing, and talking to children from the time they are born. I was struck by Andrea Riquetti's statement that parents "feel they can make a difference when everything else kind of sucks." The "everything else" refers to what I would identify as toxic stress, the experience faced by children living in poverty. My field's professional organization, the American Academy of Pediatrics, released a report in 2012 called "The Life-long Effects of Early Childhood Adversity and Toxic Stress," which summarizes evidence that early adversity and stress harm children's brains and, in many cases,

portend poor outcomes in health and well-being later in life. Talking to children is great, but physicians, child advocates, legislators, and parents would do well to think about how the United States can enact policies that will improve the lives of poor children and their adult caregivers. This would mean insuring better access to affordable preventive health care, including mental health care; subsidized child care and housing; and nutritious food.

*Christine Casas, M.D.*  
*Fellow of the American Academy of Pediatrics*  
*Houston, Texas*

As an early-interventionist speech-language pathologist, I appreciated Talbot's article. Every state has an early intervention program focussing on children three years old and younger who display a significant developmental delay. In my state of West Virginia, we have recently adopted the coaching method, whereby interventionists teach parents strategies to help their kids learn developmental skills. We focus on conversation, exposure to the sounds and rhythms of language, and "translating" the child's communicative attempts into words and phrases. It is imperative to help parents understand the importance of engaging with their child and to teach them to follow their child's lead in play. When parents feel too overwhelmed to sit down and play with their child, we help them discover ways to include learning in everyday tasks, such as bathing and meal preparation. A word counter along the lines of the LENA device that's used as part of the program Talbot describes may be a useful aid for rewarding parents for speaking more, but it is not nearly enough.

*Bonnie Sitman*  
*Shepherdstown, W. Va.*

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**WHEN SHE WAS JUST SIXTEEN** years old, in Detroit in the early sixties, Bettye LaVette recorded a single, "My Man—He's a Lovin' Man," that caught the ear of Jerry Wexler, at Atlantic Records, and became a minor R. & B. hit. She then bounced around the business for decades before connecting with the producer Joe Henry for the album "I've Got My Own Hell to Raise," in 2005, which cracked open a new chapter in her career. Remaking rock and pop songs by everyone from Fiona Apple ("Sleep to Dream") to the Who ("Love, Reign o'er Me") with her restrained phrasing and aching voice, she's now recognized as one of the greatest interpretive singers of her generation. On Jan. 27, two days shy of her sixty-ninth birthday, LaVette begins a two-week stand at the Café Carlyle.

MOVIES | CLASSICAL MUSIC  
ART | NIGHT LIFE  
THE THEATRE | DANCE  
ABOVE & BEYOND  
FOOD & DRINK

PHOTOGRAPH BY ZACH GROSS

# MOVIES

## OPENING

### BLACK OR WHITE

A documentary, directed by Roberta Grossman, about Jewish American pilots and Second World War veterans who volunteered to fight for Israel in the 1948 War of Independence. Opening Jan. 30. (In limited release.)

### AMIRA AND SAM

A drama, about an American Army veteran (Martin Starr) who falls in love with an Iraqi immigrant (Dina Shihabi). Directed by Sean Mullin. Opening Jan. 30. (In limited release.)

### COMING HOME

Zhang Yimou directed this historical drama, about a victim of China's Cultural Revolution who is allowed to return to his family. Opening Jan. 30. (In limited release.)

### GIRLHOOD

Céline Sciamma directed this drama, about a black teen-age girl in Paris who joins a gang. In French. Opening Jan. 30. (In limited release.)

### HARD TO BE A GOD

Reviewed in Now Playing. Opening Jan. 30. (Anthology Film Archives.)

### PROJECT ALMANAC

A science-fiction thriller, about teen-agers who invent a time machine. Directed by Dean Israelite; starring Jonny Weston and Sofia Black D'Elia. Opening Jan. 30. (In wide release.)

### TIMBUKTU

Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening Jan. 28. (In limited release.)



### MOVIE OF THE WEEK

A video discussion of François Truffaut's "Fahrenheit 451," from 1966, in our digital edition and online.

## NOW PLAYING

### American Sniper

Clint Eastwood's new film is a devastating pro-war movie and a devastating antiwar movie, a sombre celebration of a warrior's happiness and a sorrowful lament over a warrior's alienation and misery. Eastwood, working with the screenwriter Jason Hall, has adapted the 2012 best-seller by the Navy SEAL sharpshooter Chris Kyle, who is played here by Bradley Cooper. The film is devoted to Kyle's life as a son, husband, father, and, most of all, righteous assassin—a man always sure he is defending his country in Iraq against what he calls "savages." Perched on a rooftop in Ramadi or Sadr City, he's methodical and imperturbable, and he hardly ever misses. For the role of Kyle, Cooper got all beefed up—from the looks of it, by beer as much as by iron (it's intentionally not a movie-star body). With his brothers in the field, Kyle is convivial, profane, and funny; at home with his loving wife (played by Sienna Miller, who's excellent), he's increasingly withdrawn, dead-eyed, enraptured only by the cinema of war that's playing in his mind. As Kyle and his men rampage through the rubble of Iraqi cities, the camera records exactly what's needed to dramatize a given event and nothing more. There's no waste, never a moment's loss of concentration, definition, or speed; the atmosphere of the cities, and life on the streets, gets packed into the purposeful action shots. The cinematography is by Tom Stern.—*David Denby* (Reviewed in our issue of 12/22 & 29/14.) (In wide release.)

### Annie Hall

Addressing the camera, speaking as a person his own age (fortyish), with the same experience (a Jewish comedian from Brooklyn), pre-occupations (Bergman, Nazis, the Knicks, death), and ambitions (to dramatize his love life), Woody Allen created, in 1977, a signal work of first-person cinematic modernism. With a panoply of effects—including constant frame-breaking asides, split screens, superimpositions, flashbacks within flashbacks, an animated sequence, and

the deus-ex-machina deployment of Marshall McLuhan—Allen joins the Catskills tumbler's anything-for-a-laugh antics with a Eurocentric art-house self-awareness and a psychoanalytic obsession with baring his sexual desires and frustrations, romantic disasters, and neurotic inhibitions. His eruptive display of the New York Jewish voice is a film counterpart to "Portnoy's Complaint," but one that's laced with a strain of bromance: Allen's alter ego, Alvy Singer, and his lifelong best friend, Rob (Tony Roberts), touchingly call each other Max and gibe with an intimacy that no woman can penetrate. Yet it's a mark of Allen's artistic intuition and confessional probity that he lets Diane Keaton's epoch-defining performance run away with the movie and allows her character to run away from him.—*Richard Brody* (Museum of the Moving Image; Jan. 30.)

### Cake

A car accident has left Claire Bennett (Jennifer Aniston), a Los Angeles lawyer, with scars on her face and a surgically reconstructed body. Venting acerbic contempt for the pain of others, she gets kicked out of a support group. Unable to move without agony, she suffers, above all, from grief at the loss of her young son in the crash. She's addicted to painkillers, and goes to extremes (including blackmail) to get them, putting her devoted housekeeper, Silvana (Adriana Barraza), through increasing difficulties and dangers. Meanwhile, Claire's hallucinations of a suicide victim (Anna Kendrick) launch her on flailing but heartfelt efforts at making connections. This howling melodrama, directed by Daniel Barnz, is tamped down and thinned out to showcase Aniston's actorly subtlety, but what results is, in effect, a feature-length promotional reel. Barnz limits Claire's life, inner and outer, to moments that allow for methodical expressions, and Aniston delivers them with an acting-class precision against which her powerful personality and formidable humor constantly strain. Barraza conveys the weight of experience in sighs and inflections, and Kendrick is incisively sly, but the slack and purposeless direction leaves the entire cast emoting in a void.—*R.B.* (In limited release.)

### The Duke of Burgundy

What first appears, in the writer and director Peter Strickland's deft contrivance, to be the wicked abuse of a housemaid by her employer turns out to be the elaborate erotic ritual of a settled lesbian couple. Cynthia (Sidse Babbett Knudsen) is a staid lepidopterist; Evelyn (Chiara D'Anna), of no apparent trade, is a masochist who needs physical and emotional punishment to get off, and her desires dictate the rigid theatrics

of their intimate routine. Strickland ensconces the lovers in a sumptuous villa in a rural enclave apparently inhabited only by women. He delights in a luxurious retro-rusticity of lustrous furniture and fancy clothing, and he fashions a glossy yet familiar camera style to match. Fissures in the couple's relationship appear as Evelyn's demands for scheduled abuse grow increasingly stringent, raising the suspense effectively, if belatedly. Portentous images of insects both living and preserved are as heavy-handed as the erotic psychology is flimsy; the movie is as sexy as a chess game and as insightful as a catalogue. One line of dialogue enters the anthology of howlers: "Had I ordered a human toilet, none of this would have happened."—*R.B.* (In limited release.)

### Hard to Be a God

The late director Aleksei Guerman's last film is a grandly arbitrary carnival of neo-medieval depravity. It's also a mudpunk allegory of Russian barbarism and backwardness, as well as a confession of Guerman's own share in these traits. The action is set on a planet that knew no Renaissance (let alone an Enlightenment) and keeps its inhabitants, with their modern-day consciousness and vernacular, trapped in the low-tech crudeness and amoral violence of the Middle Ages. The protagonist is an Earth-born scientist sent to investigate the retrograde realm, where he's known as the nobleman Don Rumata and is considered divine. The drama begins with the killing of an intellectual critic, which sends the stagnant society into an inexorable spiral of wanton slaughter. Guerman films these monstrous visions with an obsessive attention to detail. With a glistening black-and-white palette, he smears the screen with mud, blood, and excrement; he seems to have a mad glee in designing, building, and deploying grotesque tools of torture and murder; his roving, wide-angle closeups render the teeming cast as living gargoyles. Yet his disgust and horror are set off with aesthetically distanced satire; the movie's artful pride in brazen destruction is itself a political commentary. In Russian.—*R.B.* (Anthology Film Archives.)

### Mommy

There's a mild futuristic thrust to the young Canadian director Xavier Dolan's new film—in which a law allows parents to deliver their problem children to the care of the state—but the movie's story, set in and near Montreal, is utterly contemporary. Steve (Antoine-Olivier Pilon), a teen-ager, gets expelled from school after setting fire to it; his tough, determined mother, Diane, or "Die" (Anne Dorval), a widow, decides to home-school Steve but can't control him. Steve's impulsively outrageous



behavior, involving insults, theft, and violence, offers no access to his inner life and has no basis in psychology; rather, it appears as Dolan's own pseudo-transgressive artistic tantrum. When a kindly neighbor, Kyla (Suzanne Clément), a teacher on furlough for stuttering, volunteers to tutor Steve, things start looking up for him; when a local lawyer helps Die in the hope of courting her, Steve has an Oedipal freakout. Mother and son gesticulate wildly but remain undefined; Dolan's blandly showy aesthetic matches the vainly hectic action. In French.—*R.B.* (In limited release.)

## Paddington

The title belongs to a bear, who arrives in London as a stowaway, speaking flawless English, with etiquette to match. The locals are no more surprised by this phenomenon than New Yorkers were by Stuart Little. Paul King's film, adapted from the books by Michael Bond, constructs a plot of sorts: Paddington's hide is sought by a taxidermist of malicious intent (Nicole Kidman), but the Brown family, who took him in—not without qualms—as a stranger, come to his rescue and thus to a full acknowledgment of his worth. There is a touch of the didactic here, with viewers reminded of their duty to refugees, and yet, from the opening sequence (featuring mock-historical footage from Paddington's native Peru), the result is gratifyingly unstiff. We get fountains of slapstick, fed by a stream of inventive whimsy; even the leaves on the trees, painted on the walls of the Brown household, bud or blow away with the movie's mood. With Hugh Bonneville, Sally Hawkins, and Jim Broadbent. Originally, Colin Firth was to provide the hero's voice, but he was replaced by Ben Whishaw: lighter, more quizzical, and less wise.—*Anthony Lane* (1/19/15) (In wide release.)

## Selma

Like "Lincoln," Ava DuVernay's stirring movie avoids the lifetime-highlights strategy of standard biopics and concentrates instead on a convulsive political process—the events leading up to the Voting Rights Act of 1965. President Lyndon Johnson (Tom Wilkinson), eager to move on to the War on Poverty, is pressured to change direction by Martin Luther King, Jr. (David Oyelowo), who is fighting for voting rights in the Oval Office and on the streets of Alabama. DuVernay captures King's canny and dominating resourcefulness in strategy meetings as well as the grand rhetoric of his public speeches, and Oyelowo adds a sexiness and an altered rhythm to King's speech patterns; his King is aggressive, barbed. A sequence set on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, as hundreds of protesters advance across the span and the Alabama state troopers terrorize them with

tear gas, recalls the magnificent crowd scenes from Soviet silent classics by Eisenstein and Pudovkin. With Carmen Ejogo, as Coretta Scott King; Colman Domingo, as the Reverend Ralph Abernathy; Tim Roth, as Governor George Wallace; and Oprah Winfrey, as the civil-rights activist Annie Lee Cooper. The script was written by Paul Webb and DuVernay (who is uncredited); the cinematography is by Bradford Young.—*D.D.* (12/22 & 29/14) (In wide release.)

## Still Alice

Julianne Moore stars as Alice Howland, a professor of linguistics at Columbia, who is stricken with early-onset Alzheimer's disease. Hitherto, life with her husband (Alec Baldwin) and three children (Kate Bosworth, Hunter Parrish, and Kristen Stewart) has run with enviable smoothness; now it hits a wall. What takes her and her loved ones aback is the force of that impact, and the rate at which she goes from forgetting a word, in passing, to not recognizing her own daughter. The intentions of the movie, which was written and directed by Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland, are noble to a fault, and guaranteed to spur fellow-feeling in anyone familiar with Alice's condition; yet the outcome errs toward dullness, and the ironies are the size of billboards. (So what if she was an expert on language use? Would the loss be any less grievous if she were a waitress?) The film, as tasteful as the trimmings of her life, shies from the horror of seeing them torn away. People behave sadly, but not badly; would that it were always the case. And would that the actors, too, especially Moore and Stewart, had been let off the leash, as they strive toward harder and wilder truths.—*A.L.* (1/19/15) (In limited release.)

## The Trial

The histrionic writhings of Orson Welles's 1962 adaptation of Kafka's novel—featuring Anthony Perkins, as the persecuted bank clerk Josef K., as well as Romy Schneider, Jeanne Moreau, Elsa Martinelli, Michael Lonsdale, Akim Tamiroff, and Welles himself, in full-throttle fury, as the Advocate—join with a frenzy of Expressionistic images to bring the story's tormented universe to life. Welles's visual compositions, with their striated, high-contrast black-and-white photography and their sets (built in Paris's Orsay station) of a jaw-dropping grandeur, burst through the screen to evoke an oppressively incomprehensible system of edicts and constraints. And who better to reveal the system's evil genius than Welles, the golden boy turned Hollywood martyr? He plays the sybaritic attorney as, in effect, an imperious yet insecure director whose dialogue seems made for a megaphone, and turns Josef K. into a rebellious actor who defies

the machine and needs to learn his lesson. Visual and textual allusions to Welles's entire oeuvre to date (starting with "K," for "Kane") and a concluding apocalyptic showdown in front of a bright and empty screen reinforce the suggestion of torments inflicted by the studio system on the innocent—on both sides of the camera and on society at large.—*R.B.* (Film Forum; Jan. 30-31.)

## Two Days, One Night

There has been a vote in the Belgian factory where Sandra (Marion Cotillard) works. Her colleagues have accepted a bonus, on the condition that she is laid off. Now she has a single weekend in which she must convince, or beg, them to change their minds: in effect, to lay down their money for her sake. The scale of the drama may be minimal, and the action repetitive (Sandra has to go around town, ringing one doorbell after another), but, in the hands of the writer-directors, Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, the movie somehow tautens with suspense. This is the first time that the Dardenne brothers have used an international star, and Cotillard rises to the occasion—or, rather, sickens, dwindles, collapses, and weeps. She is bold enough to leave us with awkward doubts about Sandra, whose mental state feels rickety, and who can seem as plaintive as she is persevering. Yet her cause is just, and once again the Dardennes' stripped-down style conjures an air of moral persuasion denied to more sumptuous films. In French.—*A.L.* (1/5/15) (In limited release.)

## The Woman on the Beach

The spare, stark, sordid Hollywood melodrama, from 1947, fills a romantic triangle with lots of personal and political history. It stars Joan Bennett as Peggy Butler, the sleek young wife of Todd Butler (Charles Bickford), an aged and renowned painter who is now blind, idled, clingy, and bitter. When she meets the tall and strapping Lt. Scott Burnett (Robert Ryan), of the local Coast Guard, who was wounded in the Second World War and is now tormented by nightmares and depression, the sexual spark between them is immediate and intense, and he tries to pry her away from her husband. The tale of marital fury, wretched dependence, and howling guilt gets extra juice from the backstory of its director, Jean Renoir—the son of the great painter—who returned home after being wounded in the First World War and fell in love with his father's teen-age model. The filmmaker, living in California in self-imposed exile from France, cuts loose with vicious moods and creative rages that feel like the destruction of an old world and the violent birth of new possibilities.—*R.B.* (MOMA; Jan. 28-30.)

## REVIVALS AND FESTIVALS

*Titles in bold are reviewed.*

### ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES

"French Classics of the 1930s-40s." Jan. 28 at 7: "The Story of a Cheat" (1936, Sacha Guitry). • Jan. 29 at 9:15: "Hôtel du Nord" (1939, Marcel Carné). • Jan. 30 at 7: "The Raven" (1943, Henri-Georges Clouzot). • The films of Aleksei Guerman. Jan. 31 at 2:45: "Trial on the Road" (1971). • Feb. 1 at 2:45: "My Friend Ivan Lapshin" (1985).

### FILM FORUM

The films of Orson Welles. Jan. 28 at 2:30, 4:40, 7, and 9:20: "Mr. Arkadin." • Jan. 30-31 at 12:30, 2:50, 5:10, 7:30, and 9:50: "The Trial." • Feb. 1 at 1:10, 3:20, and 8 and Feb. 2 at 12:30, 2:40, 4:50, and 9:45: "Touch of Evil" (1958), the 1998 reconstruction. • Feb. 2 at 7:30: "Too Much Johnson" (1938).

### FILM SOCIETY OF LINCOLN CENTER

"Dance on Camera." Feb. 1 at 5:45: "All That Jazz" (1979, Bob Fosse).

### FRENCH INSTITUTE ALLIANCE FRANÇAISE

"Eccentrics of French Comedy." Feb. 3 at 4 and 7:30: "Yoyo" (1965, Pierre Etaix).

### IFC CENTER

The films of David Cronenberg. Jan. 30-31 at midnight: "Spider" (2002).

### MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

"Acteurism: Joan Bennett." Jan. 28-30 at 1:30: "The Woman on the Beach." • Special screenings. Jan. 28 and Jan. 30 at 7, Jan. 29 at 4, Jan. 31 at 1:30, and Feb. 1 at 5: "I Am Suzanne!" (1933, Rowland V. Lee). • Jan. 28 at 7:30, Jan. 29 at 7, Jan. 30-31 and Feb. 2 at 4, Feb. 1 at 2, and Feb. 3 at 8: "My Name Is Hmmm..." (2013, Agnès Troublé, a.k.a. Agnès B.).

### MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE

"See It Big! Gordon Willis." Jan. 30 at 7: "Annie Hall." • Jan. 31 at 3: "End of the Road" (1970, Aram Avakian). • Jan. 31 at 7: "The Godfather" (1972, Francis Ford Coppola). • Feb. 1 at 7: "The Godfather: Part II" (1974, Coppola). • "Endangered by the Moving Image: The Criminalization of Black and Brown Bodies." Feb. 1 at 2: A panel discussion with the writers Jelani Cobb, Mia Mask, Greg Tate, and others to be announced.

# CLASSICAL MUSIC



The dreamlike music of Toru Takemitsu (1930-1996) is the lodestar of a festival organized by Joel Sachs.

## SOUND AND SILENCE

*Juilliard's "Focus!" concerts celebrate modern Japanese composers.*

WHEN CLAUDE DEBUSSY PUBLISHED his maritime masterpiece, "La Mer," in 1905, he placed on the score's cover a stylized detail from "Under the Wave off Kanagawa," Katsushika Hokusai's woodblock print of apocalyptic waves towering over Mt. Fuji. Debussy's veneration of Japanese art helped initiate an intricate, evolving conversation between Western-style classical composition and Japanese culture. The conversation began in earnest when Japanese composers came into their own after the Second World War; the results of the interaction can be heard in this year's "Focus!" festival at Juilliard, titled "Nippon Gendai Ongaku: Japanese Music Since 1945." Appropriately, the final program, an orchestral concert on Jan. 30, begins with Debussy and ends with his most faithful twentieth-century follower, Toru Takemitsu.

"Music is either sound or silence," Takemitsu once said, expanding on insights from John Cage, who was also smitten with Japanese culture. A sense of music poised on the edge of stillness marks many of Takemitsu's works, including "Far Calls. Coming, Far!" and "Twill by Twilight," both of which will be performed on Jan. 30. Fragrant, ambiguous chords materialize and then drift away in a gently heaving motion that the composer called a "sea of tonality." It is tempting to relate the effect to the balance of figure and space in Hokusai's prints, but Takemitsu, who died in 1996, was too sophisticated and cosmopolitan an artist to be limited to a stereotypical Japanese aesthetic. His enveloping textures are mists in which one can easily become lost, in a way both pleasant and eerie; they have the unnerving potency of dreams.

Much modern Japanese music veers in a different direction, toward bustle, noise, and neon glare. Misato Mochizuki's "La Chambre Claire," programmed on the opening night of "Focus!," is urban in mood, and its restless, self-replicating rhythms recall Roland Barthes's ideas about the art of photography. Mochizuki describes the work as a "cry in the midst of silence," but it is quite distinct from Takemitsu's deep breaths amid stillness. Still, Mochizuki and the other contemporary Japanese composers featured in the festival would probably endorse Takemitsu's mission statement: "To replace the great shattered mirror of Western music, to include the reflections of other mirrors—that is our task today."

—Alex Ross



## OPERA

### Metropolitan Opera

Susan Stroman's transformation of Lehár's "**Merry Widow**" from Viennese operetta to American musical succeeds most with those who are best suited to it: the Broadway star Kelli O'Hara, making a solid Met debut in the role of Valencienne; the suave and versatile baritone Nathan Gunn, as Danilo; the venerable Thomas Allen, as winning as ever in the buffo role of Baron Zeta; and, not least, a captivating troupe of singing, dancing Grisettes. These are the final performances featuring Renée Fleming, who manages to bring a modicum of elegance to the title role; Paul Nadler conducts. (Jan. 28 at 7:30 and Jan. 31 at 8.) • Valery Gergiev, the paramount Russian conductor of our time, is leading the Met premiere of Tchaikovsky's "**Iolanta**" as a prelude to a work with a substantial Met provenance, Bartók's "**Bluebeard's Castle**." Anna Netrebko, Piotr Beczala, and Aleksei Markov take the leading roles in the first opera; Mikhail Petrenko and Nadja Michael portray Duke Bluebeard and his doomed wife. (Jan. 29 and Feb. 3 at 7:30.) • With his Roman glamour and pretty, sometimes tremulous voice, the tenor Vittorio Grigolo bounds onstage in the current revival of Offenbach's "**Les Contes d'Hoffmann**" looking as though he's taken a wrong turn out of a Donizetti comedy and into the angsty world of the titular alcoholic poet. But Grigolo works hard to overcome type, with thrilling singing and an impetuous, charismatic portrayal. Bartlett Sher's overstuffed production nonetheless tells the story, as the Four Villains (a campy Thomas Hampson) and Hoffmann's Muse (the taut, transfixing Kate Lindsey) guide the poet out of his romantic entanglements with Antonia (Hibla Gerzmava), Giulietta (Christine Rice), and Olympia (a sparkling Erin Morley) and back to his art. Yves Abel follows the euphoric highs and swooping lows of Hoffmann's escapades in the pit. (Jan. 31 at 1.) (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

## ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

### New York Philharmonic

The orchestra's latest program—Stravinsky's "Song of the Nightingale," Chopin's Concerto No. 2 in F Minor, and Bartók's "Miraculous Mandarin" Suite—demands a broad mixture of talents. On hand to provide it are two distinctive American artists, the pianist Emanuel Ax, who will bring his trademark lyricism and clear-headed style to the Chopin, and the conductor David Robertson, whose command of color and incisive technique (honed through years of new-music advocacy) should be invaluable in the Stravinsky and Bartók works. The concerts begin with Rachmaninoff's diaphanous "Vocalise." (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-875-5656. Jan. 28-29 at 7:30, Jan. 30 at 11 A.M., and Jan. 31 at 8.)

### Mariinsky Orchestra

In a strange twist of music history, both of Tchaikovsky's completed piano concertos were given their world premieres in America—the First in Boston in 1875 and the Second in New York in 1881 with the Philharmonic. Now Valery Gergiev and his magnificent orchestra bring the Second back to Gotham, with the hard-driven soloist Denis Matsuev in the spotlight. The program begins with music by Rodion Shchedrin and closes with Prokofiev's thrilling Symphony No. 5 in B-Flat Major. (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. Jan. 28 at 8.)

### Ensemble Caprice:

#### "Turning Music Into Gold"

In a week that resounds with the clangor of big orchestras, the Metropolitan Museum is going small. This program, a pendant to the exhibition

"Bartholomeus Spranger: Splendor and Eroticism in Imperial Prague," features the acclaimed early-music ensemble from Montreal, which will provide a window into a long-lost world in which Czech musicians performed sacred and secular music from Germany, Italy (three Monteverdi madrigals), and Eastern Europe. (Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. 212-570-3949. Jan. 29 at 7.)

### Chicago Symphony Orchestra

The orchestra that many believe to be the finest in the country always sounds great in Carnegie Hall; it is led by Riccardo Muti, its current music director, the elegant and exacting master of a limited repertoire. These concerts betray his longtime enthusiasm for the symphonies of Scriabin, a composer far better known for his piano works. The first of three programs features music by Mendelssohn and Debussy ("La Mer") as a prelude to Scriabin's Symphony No. 3, "The Divine Poem"; the second offers German masterworks by Brahms (the Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-Flat Major, with the commanding Yefim Bronfman) and Schumann (the Symphony No. 3, "Rhenish"); and the third, all Russian, indulges in the massed sonorities of two works performed with the outstanding C.S.O. Chorus, Scriabin's obscure First Symphony and Prokofiev's celebrated film score "Alexander Nevsky." (212-247-7800. Jan. 30-31 at 8 and Feb. 1 at 2.)

## RECITALS

### Music at the 92nd Street Y

Jan. 28 at 7:30: The admired pianist Shai Wosner and the Parker Quartet go the extra mile by putting contemporary music by Missy Mazzoli and György Kurtág ("Aus der Ferne V") in context with two beloved works by Schubert, the Piano Sonata in A Major, D. 959, and the String Quartet No. 14, "Death and the Maiden." • Jan. 31 at 8: The exciting American violinist Jennifer Koh has built her career by performing music new and old with equal determination. She presents the world premiere of "For Violin Alone," by an American master, John Harbison, in a program that includes not only Bach's Solo Sonatas Nos. 2-3 but also Berio's daunting "Sequenza VIII." (Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500.)

### Garrick Ohlsson

Riccardo Muti is not Scriabin's only advocate this week. This enduring American pianist, known for his intellectual curiosity and athletic technique, combines several vivid works by the composer (including the Sonata No. 7, "White Mass") with music by two illustrious fellow-Russians, Rachmaninoff (the "Corelli Variations") and Prokofiev. (Alice Tully Hall. 212-721-6500. Jan. 29 at 7:30.)

### Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center

Jan. 29 at 7:30: Two concerts this week take up the cause of new music; the first features works by such composers as Bruno Mantovani, Vivian Fung, and the brilliant Andrew Norman ("Light Screens"). The performers include the violist Richard O'Neill and the flutist Tara Helen O'Connor. (Kaplan Penthouse.) • Feb. 3 at 7:30: The ever-expanding possibilities of percussion instruments continue to inspire composers. This concert, which features the pianists Gilbert Kalish and Wu Han as well as Ayano Kataoka and other percussionists, is heavy on classic modern repertoire, offering such gems as Cage's "In a Landscape" and Steve Reich's "Drumming: Part I," as well as Bartók's Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion. (Alice Tully Hall.) (212-875-5788.)

PREVIEWS BEGIN FEB 5



## The Mystery Of Love & Sex



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# ART

## MUSEUMS SHORT LIST

### METROPOLITAN MUSEUM

"Cubism: The Leonard A. Lauder Collection." Through Feb. 16.

### MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

"Henri Matisse: The Cut-Outs." Through Feb. 10.

### MOMA PSI

"Wael Shawky: Cabaret Crusades." Opens Jan. 31.

### GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM

"V. S. Gaitonde: Painting as Process, Painting as Life." Through Feb. 11.

### BROOKLYN MUSEUM

"Killer Heels: The Art of the High-Heeled Shoe." Through Feb. 15.

### AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

"Nature's Fury: The Science of Natural Disasters." Through Aug. 9.

### NEW MUSEUM

"Chris Ofili: Night and Day." Through Feb. 1.

## MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

### Morgan Library & Museum

"Exploring France: Oil Sketches from the Thaw Collection"

It's no blockbuster (just fourteen little pictures on a single wall), but this quietly incisive display of recently donated oil paintings on paper reads as a time line of a critical shift in the history of French landscape painting. In the Napoleonic era, artists making pilgrimages to Italy started not just drawing but also painting *en plein air*, and when they came home they continued to explore gradations of sunlight and cloud. One fine example is by Carle Vernet—son of the famous marine painter Claude Vernet and father of the famous military painter Horace Vernet, but overshadowed himself—in which the horizon is a rumble of green and black foliage, and a black

cloud hovers over a farmhouse. Later, Barbizon School painters like Charles-François Daubigny imbued landscape with the seriousness once reserved for historical scenes. A hint that Impressionism was about to be born can be found in Eugène Boudin's painting of the beach at Étretat as a glorious mess of purple dappled light. Through Oct. 4.

## GALLERIES—UPTOWN

### Ryan McNamara

If you've never seen this charismatic young artist's elaborately staged performances, the objects here may inspire FOHMO—fear of having missed out. Leotards printed with the face of Amy Carter, pinned to the wall like butterflies under colored glass, were initially worn by dancers on the High Line as they recited President Carter's "malaise" speech. Other works, such as a hand truck entangled with psychedelic fabric, recycle elements from McNamara's "Meem," a fun house of overlapping choreography derived from the Internet. Every aesthetic experience, McNamara seems to insist, is just one more node in an ever-expanding network of signs and selfies. Through Feb. 28. (Boone, 745 Fifth Ave., at 57th St. 212-752-2929.)

### Liz Nielsen

The Brooklyn-based photographer's vivid new photograms seem equally inspired by the children's toy Colorforms and by color-field painting. Nielsen uses transparent gels to overlap and juxtapose shapes against dark backgrounds; each of the images is unique. At times, the sprightly compositions suggest landscapes, totems, or flags—like the scenery of sophisticated cartoons. In one, big swatches of magenta, pink, purple, and sky blue combine so happily they could dispel any glum mood. Through Feb. 28. (Laurence Miller, 20 W. 57th St. 212-397-3930.)

## GALLERIES—CHELSEA

### Yael Bartana

Two new videos by the Israeli artist reckon, in very different ways, with the mutability of cultural identity. "Inferno," a bombastic high-gloss spectacle, depicts the construction (real) and destruction (imagined) of a mega church based on Solomon's Temple in São Paulo, complete with helicopter shots of flying menorahs, Michael Bay-style action sequences, and a soundtrack featuring "Avinu Malkeinu" remixed as a James Bond-style theme song. The better video is the quieter "True Finns," a documentary about European citizenship in the shadow of populist parties. By inviting a diverse group of people residing in Finland—a Somali refugee, an

Estonian immigrant, a member of the Sami minority—to engage in heartfelt debates and therapeutic role-playing, Bartana delivers far more dramatic tension than she does in her *verkohte* action film. Through Feb. 21. (Petzel, 456 W. 18th St. 212-680-9467.)

## "No Entrance, No Exit"

Bodies are complicated, often absent presences for the three young artists in this challenging show. "Necklace," a video by Alina Tenser, features a string of beads being reshaped from a circle into complex tangles by a dancer's foot. Viola Yeşiltaş contributes photographs of sculptures by her reclusive father, which she redeploys in her own art. The standout is Anna K.E., whose installation involving colorful swimsuits, a digital projection, and a tiled trapezoid on the floor evokes the pleasures of pools but remains elusive. In a slapstick video triptych, the artist is seen standing on a windowsill trying to line up her limbs with the panes, only to fall, again and again, to the floor. Through Feb. 21. (The Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St. 212-255-5793.)

## Reinier Gerritsen

Those concerned about the death of print may find comfort in this Dutch photographer's portraits of people reading books on the New York subway. Each horizontal picture includes one or more absorbed readers, among those seated and standing on the train. Evenly lit and beautifully balanced, the friezes look too good to be true and, in fact, they were digitally collaged from a series of quick exposures. At its best, the work has a marvellous, painterly sensitivity to the range of attitudes and expressions in an anonymous but congenial crowd. Through Feb. 7. (Saul, 535 W. 22nd St. 212-627-2410.)

## GALLERIES—BROOKLYN

### Susan Bee

The painter, a New Yorker, fills the gallery with small, unframed photographs made between 1976 and 1981. Under the influence of Man Ray and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Bee experimented with the cameraless image, most often arranging objects on photosensitive paper. Some of these are cool, geometric abstractions, minimalist studies of triangles in shades of black and gray; others present scissors, lengths of twine, tulips, and other objects in hectic jumbles. Some of the pictures have been altered with hand-painted squiggles or splashes of chemicals. It doesn't feel like mature work, but that's part of its appeal. It's rough, untidy, and, here and there, even wild. Through Feb. 15. (Southfirst, 60 N. 6th St., Williamsburg. 718-599-4884.)



There are echoes of Walker Evans and Robert Frank in the American photographer Alec Soth's soulful show "Songbook," which opens at the Sean Kelly gallery on Jan. 30. (Above, "Georgia Lynn, Boulder, Colorado, 2013.")





## NIGHT LIFE

### ROCK AND POP

*Musicians and night-club proprietors lead complicated lives; it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.*

#### Béla Fleck and the Knights

Fleck, a native New Yorker, is an acknowledged master of the modern banjo, having achieved success working in country, rock, jazz, and, of course, bluegrass idioms. He was named for the Hungarian composer Béla Bartók, and he has demonstrated classical leanings, too. He has now joined forces with the Knights, a flexible, open-minded orchestral collective. The expansive program includes the New York premiere of "The Impostor," an original composition written by Fleck for banjo and orchestra. (Schimmel Center, Pace University, 3 Spruce St. 212-346-1715. Jan. 28.)

#### Owen Pallett

Until 2010, when he released "Heartland," the singer-songwriter, composer, violin looper, and all-around wizard of sound recorded and performed under the alias Final Fantasy, a tribute to the series of video games of the same name. The virtuosic musician often collaborates with other artists, and was nominated for an Oscar for the score he penned with Arcade Fire's William Butler to Spike Jonze's 2013 film, "Her." But it's on his own that Pallett shines the brightest, and ditching his gamer moniker seems to have helped him grow. His fourth album, "In Conflict," which came out last May, is a bewitching opus of bombastic, confessional pop songs that are ingeniously designed and deeply moving. (Music Hall of Williamsburg, 66 N. 6th St., Brooklyn 718-486-5400. Jan. 29.)

#### The Thompson Family

This group of relatives rivals the Wainwright-McGarrigle-Roche clan when it comes to multigenerational musical talent (and internecine strife). The progenitors are Richard and Linda Thompson, who were among the brightest lights of the British folk-rock scene. Indeed, their collaborations "I Want to See the Bright Lights Tonight," from 1974, and "Shoot Out the Lights," from 1982, are among the best records of that style and era. Before their bitter breakup, the couple also collaborated on another project, their son, Teddy Thompson, born in 1976, who has forged a strong career of his own. Recently, he called on his parents, his sister Kami, his half brother Jack, and his nephew Zak Hobbs to join him in contributing songs to the album "Family," a lovely document that he produced and which came out last year. With the unfortunate exception of his mom, whose gorgeous voice has been compromised by spasmodic dysphonia, they'll all be performing with him at City Winery. (155 Varick St. 212-608-0555. Jan. 29-31.)

#### Jack White

When the White Stripes finally called it quits, a few years ago, the guitarist White didn't go gently into that good night. He has released two solo albums, "Blunderbuss," from 2012, and "Lazaretto," from last year, and he is at least partly responsible for the resurgence of vinyl sales (the

vinyl edition of "Lazaretto" includes many tricks, including bonus tracks hidden under the record label). At Madison Square Garden, the herky-jerky, deeply strange title track to "Lazaretto" and the molten instrumental "High Ball Stepper" will be highlights of the show. (Seventh Ave. at 33rd St. 800-745-3000. Jan. 30.)

### JAZZ AND STANDARDS

#### "Duke, Dizzy, Trane & Mingus: Jazz Titans"

The Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra turns its sights on four unassailable members of jazz royalty: Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, John Coltrane, and Charles Mingus. The program is an exploration of the music of the Americas, and the J.A.L.C.O. is performing excerpts from Ellington's "Latin American Suite," Coltrane's "Olé Coltrane," Mingus's "Tijuana Moods," and Gillespie's pioneering Afro-Cuban repertoire. (Rose Theatre, Jazz at Lincoln Center, Broadway at 60th St. 212-721-6500. Jan. 29-31.)

#### "Friends of Mabel: Heroes of Cabaret"

The artful subtlety of the vocalist Mabel Mercer seems nearly unimaginable in our raucous age, and she is held in the highest esteem by the cabaret cognoscenti. An evening devoted to the legendary chanteuse features both historic film clips and live performances by such Mercer devotees as **KT Sullivan**, **Steve Ross**, and the team of **Eric Comstock** and **Barbara Fasano**. (Zeb's, 223 W. 28th St., 2nd fl. facebook.com/clipjoint. Jan. 29.)

#### Mostly Other People Do the Killing

Did the world need a note-for-note rendition of the revered Miles Davis album "Kind of Blue"? It got one anyway, in the form of "Blue," from this ever-provocative band, who, if little else, certainly generated a ton of publicity. The cheeky exuberance of this quintet and the biting force of the saxophonist **Jon Irabagon** make them worth attending to, no matter what the repertoire. (Cornelia Street Café, 29 Cornelia St. 212-989-9319. Jan. 28.)

#### Chris Potter Underground Orchestra

The saxophonist, a dulcet-toned dynamo who has played with a notable array of artists, from Dave Holland and Pat Metheny to Steely Dan, recently released a high-reaching album, "Imaginary Cities." At the Jazz Standard, he beefs up his Underground band with a string contingent in order to approximate the opulent textures found on the album's crafty originals. (116 E. 27th St. 212-576-2232. Jan. 27-31.)

#### Vanguard Jazz Orchestra

This valiant sixteen-member band, which was founded in 1966 as the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra, has laid claim to Monday nights at its namesake club for decades, but once a year the ensemble takes its place in the spotlight for an entire week. Packed with topnotch players, including the saxophonists **Rich Perry** and **Gary Smulyan**, and fortified by shrewd arrangements that make the most of its swinging precision and agile heft, the V.J.O. is one of the city's treasures. (178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. 212-255-4037. Jan. 27-Feb. 1.)

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Steve Reich and Stephen Sondheim discuss the intersection of their respective arts for "American Songbook."

## DRAMA KING

*An iconic classical composer inspires the maestro of Broadway.*

IT'S ALWAYS A PLEASURE to listen as musical artists renew their faith in their craft, not only in the doing but also in the appreciation they express toward those artists who inspire them. The protean, game-changing lyricist and composer Stephen Sondheim has said that since he began listening to the legendary minimalist composer Steve Reich, many decades ago now, he has felt constantly energized, moved, and surprised by his near-contemporary. (Born in 1930, Sondheim is Reich's senior by six years.) On Jan. 31, as part of Lincoln Center's "American Songbook" series, the two masters will hold a conversation (conceived and co-produced by David Brendel), with musical interludes by the longtime Sondheim conductor Paul Gemignani, the performers Kate Baldwin and Michael Cerveris, and Ensemble Signal, among others.

When I talked with Sondheim recently, he told me that it was difficult to describe what it was about Reich that moved him so, especially since the two composers work and thrive in such different worlds. "You can't be an architect of your admiration. It just is," Sondheim said. "But what I can say is that his work has great rhythmic verve and what we people in the show business call vamps. Then

there's his imagination." He described Reich's inspiring use of the human voice. "I think the first thing I heard—on CD, not in a concert hall—was 'Come Out.'" That short, intense 1966 work was created at a politically charged time; the looped voice is that of a young black man who was beaten during the 1964 Harlem riots. Sondheim said that what interested him in that piece was Reich's phrasing technique and his use of speech as music. "When I try to write a song, I try to write the way we speak, and the musicality of conversation is always something I'm intrigued by. In Reich, it's the rhythmic vitality and the relationship between speech and music that gets me." He went on: "There's a great sense of drama in Reich's work, even the smaller pieces. When you hear 'Different Trains'—Reich's 1988 study of family and Jewishness—"you know it's a great dramatic piece because it *is*."

"Plus, do you know who his mother is?" Sondheim said, after a pause. "You could hear the table break when my jaw dropped after I learned Reich's mother was June Carroll"—who co-wrote Broadway tunes such as "Monotonous," which helped make Eartha Kitt a star. "So here you have two people in one family writing songs—I shouldn't say songs—music that has this conversational quality. I have a blanket admiration for Reich, and I never heard a piece of his that bored me. The people who dig him just look forward to listening. You never know what's next."

—Hilton Als



## OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

### Brooklynite

The Vineyard presents the world premiere of a musical directed by Michael Mayer, with music and lyrics by Peter Lerman, a book by Lerman and Mayer, and choreography by Steven Hoggett, about a hardware-store clerk who wants to be a superhero, and a superhero who wishes she could live a normal life. Previews begin Jan. 29. (108 E. 15th St. 212-353-0303.)

### Fish in the Dark

Larry David stars in this comedy, which he wrote, about a death in the family. Also starring Rita Wilson, Jayne Houdyshell, Ben Shenkman, Jake Cannavale, Lewis J. Stadler, and Rosie Perez. Anna D. Shapiro directs. Previews begin Feb. 2. (Cort, 138 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200.)

### Pretty Filthy

The Civilians presents a new piece, by Bess Wohl, about the adult-entertainment industry. With music and lyrics by Michael Friedman; Steve Cosson directs. Previews begin Jan. 31. (Abrons Arts Center, 466 Grand St. 212-352-3101.)

### Rasheeda Speaking

The New Group presents a play by Joel Drake Johnson, about a power struggle between two doctor's-office receptionists, one black, one white. Dianne Wiest and Tonya Pinkins star in Cynthia Nixon's directorial debut. In previews. (Pershing Square Signature Center, 480 W. 42nd St. 212-244-7529.)

### Verité

In a new play by Nick Jones, a stay-at-home mom is offered a deal to write her memoir, if she can make her life more interesting. Moritz von Stuelpnagel directs the LCT3 production. Previews begin Jan. 31. (Claire Tow, 150 W. 65th St. 212-239-6200.)

### Zero Hour: Tokyo Rose's Last Tape

Japan Society presents this play, written and directed by Miwa Yanagi, based on the true story of a group of Japanese-American women who voiced Japanese propaganda over the radio in Japan during the Second World War. In English and Japanese with English subtitles. Jan. 29-31. (333 E. 47th St. 212-715-1258.)

## NOW PLAYING

### Da

"It's a wonder children survive their parents," observed an audience member during the intermission of this revival of Hugh Leonard's 1978 Tony winner for Best Play. In 1968, Charlie (Ciarán O'Reilly), a writer, returns to Dublin from England for the funeral of his father (Paul O'Brien), and to shut

up the old house. But he can't shut up the voices and memories of the past, which follow him around as if there were no scrim between the living and the dead. Old grievances are rehearsed, nettlesome quarrels revived, embarrassments and disappointments relived. Charlotte Moore directs this decidedly dark interpretation, in which harm is done—sometimes consciously, sometimes inadvertently—by and to virtually every character. It's an evocation of something true in the Irish psyche, but a little spark, a glimmer of hope, seems to be missing. (DR2, at 103 E. 15th St. 212-727-2737.)

### Film Chinois

A drama of girls, gats, and a little red book, Damon Chua's theatrical pastiche plays out in Beijing just after the Second World War. Leggy Chinadoll (Roseanne Ma) lays a honey trap for a naïve American op, while a politico toys with a night-club singer. In this Pan Asian Repertory production, Chua shifts noir's emphasis from men to women, from Americans to East Asians, but without much conviction or flair. There's a touch of "The Quiet American," a soupçon of "The Lady from Shanghai," and a lot of nonsense. Under Kaipo Schwab's tentative direction, neither the plot nor the characters seem particularly credible—not Benjamin Jones's corn-fed spy, not Jean Brassard's unctuous Belgian ambassador, not Katie Lee Hill's dim songbird, Simone. The Communist threat, subtextual in most noir, is made too blatant here. At least Hill looks cute when she trades Simone's cheongsam for a Mao suit. (Beckett, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200.)

### I'm Gonna Pray for You So Hard

It's impossible to disregard the fact that Halley Feiffer, who wrote this unsparing drama, is the daughter of the famous playwright and cartoonist Jules Feiffer. The two characters are Ella (Betty Gilpin), a young theatre actress, and her father, David (Reed Birney), a boozy grandee of American playwriting. Up late in their Upper West Side kitchen, David spills out show-biz anecdotes and worldly (if wounding) advice, which Ella laps up with masochistic awe. Their dynamic is as toxic as it is keenly observed, and Birney, under Trip Cullman's direction, creates a vivid portrait of literary ego. In a late twist, Feiffer turns the tables on both her characters and the audience. Is the play autobiographical? Feiffer has found a riveting way of dodging the question. (Atlantic Stage 2, at 330 W. 16th St. 866-811-4111.)

### Into the Woods

Noah Brody and Ben Steinfeld, of Fiasco Theatre, directed this version

of Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine's huge and complicated 1986 musical. Borrowing heavily from the director John Doyle's revolutionary reconceptualizing of two signature Sondheim shows—"Company," in 2006, and Doyle's 2005 masterpiece, "Sweeney Todd"—Brody and Steinfeld have stripped the production down, relocating the orchestra to the stage, with the actors playing the instruments. Brody and Steinfeld have also eradicated Sondheim's deep-are-the-roots sense of how people act and think with whimsy. The ordinarily great performer Jennifer Mudge, who plays the Witch, has been directed to act the role as if it had nothing to do with a child's idea of sexuality but, rather, with mere dress up: she and the other actors have been defanged and, having lost their bite, they just sparkle. (Laura Pels, 111 W. 46th St. 212-719-1300.)

### Winners

In Maggie Bofill's dark comedy, two teen-age kids (David Gelles and Arielle Goldman) helplessly watch as the grownups around them behave atrociously: their once corporate dad (Grant Shaud)—now a schlumpy stock boy at the Gap—smokes pot with his pedophile supervisor (Scott Sowers), while their nasty, razor-sharp mom (Florencia Lozano) sneaks around with her boss. Even the cat (the hilarious Stephanie Hsu) is depressed by what she sees. Under the direction of Pamela Berlin, Gelles and Goldman are convincing as teen-agers who are as sane and decent as they are immature, but Shaud and Lozano are miscast: it's hard to imagine that their already unsympathetic characters ever had any chemistry, or, even if it all works out, that they ever will. (Ensemble Studio Theatre, 549 W. 52nd St. 866-811-4111.)

### The Woodsman

James Ortiz wrote and co-directed this show, in which the Tin Man from L. Frank Baum's "Wizard of Oz" is an innocent young woodsman (Ortiz) in love with a beautiful girl (Eliza Simpson) who was enslaved by the evil Wicked Witch of the East. When the witch learns of the relationship, she puts a curse on the young man's axe, which slowly takes each of his limbs, his head, and then his heart. This inventive hour-long, wordless fairy tale, though sometimes a bit too earnest, has some fabulous life-size puppets—a truly frightening witch, a lion-headed bear, and a pack of spying crows—handled by nine gifted young actors from Strangemen and Co.'s ensemble, all of whom also sing and provide sound effects by way of snapping fingers, stamping feet, whistling, flapping, and cawing. (59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200.)

## ALSO NOTABLE

### ALADDIN

New Amsterdam

### BEAUTIFUL: THE CAROLE KING MUSICAL

Stephen Sondheim

### BETWEEN RIVERSIDE AND CRAZY

Second Stage

### THE BOOK OF MORMON

Eugene O'Neill

### CABARET

Studio 54

### CITY OF

Peter Jay Sharp

### CONSTELLATIONS

Samuel J. Friedman

### THE CURIOUS INCIDENT OF THE DOG IN THE NIGHT-TIME

Ethel Barrymore

### A DELICATE BALANCE

Golden

### DISGRACED

Lyceum

### THE ELEPHANT MAN

Booth

### A GENTLEMAN'S GUIDE TO LOVE AND MURDER

Walter Kerr

### THE GOLDEN TOAD

Ellen Stewart

### HAMILTON

Public

### HEDWIG AND THE ANGRY INCH

Belasco

### HONEYMOON IN VEGAS

Nederlander

### IF/THEN

Richard Rodgers

### IT'S ONLY A PLAY

Jacobs

### LET THE RIGHT ONE IN

St. Ann's Warehouse

### LIONBOY

New Victory. Through Feb. 1.

### LION KING

Minskoff

### LITTLE CHILDREN DREAM OF GOD

Roundabout Underground

### MAMMA MIA!

Broadhurst

### MATILDA THE MUSICAL

Shubert

### LES MISÉRABLES

Imperial

### A MONTH IN THE COUNTRY

Classic Stage Company

### ON THE TOWN

Lyric

### THE RIVER

Circle in the Square

### THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS

59E59

### SHESH YAK

Rattlestick

### WICKED

Gershwin

### WINNERS AND LOSERS

SoHo Rep. Through Feb. 1.

### YOU CAN'T TAKE IT WITH YOU

Longacre



# DANCE

## New York City Ballet

A second week devoted mainly to Balanchine includes his witty "Donizetti Variations," the stylish and demonic "La Valse," and "Chaconne," a late work set to themes from Gluck's "Orfeo." The latter begins as a kind of intergalactic elegy; in the opening section, the ballerina (assisted by her cavalier) seems to float through space, released from the bounds of gravity and time. On Thursday and Saturday evening, as part of an all-Bach program, the company brings back Jerome Robbins's "The Goldberg Variations," last performed here in 2008. It's a deconstruction of the Baroque spirit, exploratory and rigorous, intimate and formal. The excellent Cameron Grant will be at the keyboard. • Jan. 27 at 7:30, Jan. 30 at 8, and Feb. 1 at 3: "Symphonic Dances," "The Cage," "Andantino," and "Cortège Hongrois." • Jan. 28 and Feb. 3 at 7:30: "Donizetti Variations," "La Valse," and "Chaconne." • Jan. 29 at 7:30 and Jan. 31 at 8: "Concerto Barocco" and "The Goldberg Variations." • Jan. 31 at 2: "Serenade," "Agon," and "Symphony in C." (David H. Koch, Lincoln Center. 212-496-0600. Through March 1.)

## Shannon Hummel / Cora Dance

Between establishing a pay-what-you-can dance school in Red Hook and bringing dance to the people in school gyms and public spaces, Hummel hasn't presented much work in traditional theatres lately. "Stories," her show at BAM Fisher, is a collection of new and recent pieces: a funny solo, a poignant one, an unsettling duet of disconnection, and a sneak preview of a collaboration with the hip-hop choreographer Solomon Goodwin. (321 Ashland Pl., Brooklyn. 718-636-4100. Jan. 29-31.)

## Raja Feather Kelly/Tzveta Kassabova

Two acclaimed veterans of David Dorfman Dance and Pearsonwidrig Dance Theatre team up for a collaborative evening, titled "Super We." Kelly's solo is an homage to Andy Warhol with a complicated structure and elaborate costuming. Kassabova's is an agitated evocation of loss. One duet addresses the difficulty of love, another the speed of modern life. (St. Mark's Church In-the-Bowery, Second Ave. at 10th St. 212-352-3101. Jan. 29-31.)

## MovementTalks / "Shell Shock"

These informal talks, hosted by Edward Henkel—formerly of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, Eliot Feld, and others—touch upon themes of social relevance in dance. The focus is on the work of Roman Baca, a ballet dancer turned marine who founded Exit12, a choreographic workshop for war veterans. Excerpts of work produced by Exit12 will be performed. (92nd Street Y, Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500. Jan. 30.)

## Daniel Léveillé Danse

In "Solitudes Solo," the Montreal-based choreographer, adept at cold beauty, presents five

dancers in sequential isolation. The solos, set to Bach sonatas and partitas for violin, are austere, exposed, tense with clenched fists and strenuous jumps. In imposing physical challenges, Léveillé seeks to suggest spiritual ones. (Abrons Arts Center, 466 Grand St. 212-352-3101. Jan. 30-Feb. 1.)

## "Dance on Camera"

The venerable film festival is particularly rich in documentaries this year. There's one on the effusive art of cheerleading ("American Cheerleader") and another that follows the struggles of three Norwegian boys striving for a career in ballet ("Ballet Boys"), as well as several devoted to the work of a single choreographer (including "Girlchild Diary," about Meredith Monk). It also features a newly restored digital version of Bob Fosse's semiautobiographical 1979 musical, "All That Jazz," and closes with "Desert Dancer" (starring Freida Pinto, with choreography by Akram Khan), a narrative film set in Iran during the 2009 riots, based on the true story of a young man who formed an underground dance company with his friends, in spite of a government ban on women dancing in public. For a full lineup, go to [filmlinc.com](http://filmlinc.com). (Walter Reade Theatre, Lincoln Center. 212-875-5600. Jan. 30-Feb. 3.)

## "Dances by Very Young Choreographers"

As she has for more than twenty years, Ellen Robbins—a former dancer and a teacher of modern dance to kids of all ages—presents a showcase of short works by her pupils, the youngest of whom are still in elementary school. Robbins mentors them, takes their ideas seriously, and stages them accordingly. This isn't a cutesy school recital but a playground of ideas. (New York Live Arts, 219 W. 19th St. 212-924-0077. Jan. 31-Feb. 1.)

# ABOVE & BEYOND

## "Video Games Live"

Perhaps the easiest way to get kids to the symphony, this event is a full-blown spectacle of video-game music performed by an orchestra and accompanied by lights, lasers, synchronized video screens, choirs, and costumed performers. The first "Video Games Live" was presented in 2005 at the Hollywood Bowl with the L.A. Philharmonic, and the series has been touring non-stop worldwide ever since. The shows stay fresh with an ever-changing lineup of pieces from new games and arcade classics, many of which are being performed live for the first time. Conducted by the video-game composer Emmanuel Fratianni, the performance at the Beacon Theatre features the world premiere of "Donkey Kong Country," and includes a segment celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the "Legend of Zelda." (Broadway at 74th St. 212-465-6500. Jan. 31.)

## Black History Month

Among the Brooklyn Historical Society's packed lineup this month is a screening on Feb. 2 at 6:30 of William Greaves's "Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One,"

from 1968, introduced by the actor Steve Buscemi and followed by a discussion with this magazine's Richard Brody and the filmmaker Shola Lynch, who is also curator of the Moving Image and Recorded Sound Division of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. ([brooklynhistory.org](http://brooklynhistory.org).) At the Schomburg Center itself, on Feb. 4 at 6:30, there's a screening of "Invisible Heroes: African Americans in the Spanish Civil War," detailing the efforts of eighty-five African-Americans who supported the Spanish Republic in 1936. Also at the Schomburg, later this month, there'll be events focussing on the Underground Railroad and the fiftieth anniversary of the assassination of Malcolm X. ([schomburg.org](http://schomburg.org).) The Brooklyn Museum's "Target First Saturday" program on Feb. 7 is organized around Black History Month, with a free evening of discussions, poetry, crafts, and music. The headliner is the R. & B. artist Bilal. ([brooklynmuseum.org](http://brooklynmuseum.org).)

## AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

At the **Outsider Art Fair** (Jan. 29-Feb. 1), the only stylistic trend shared by the artists is emphatic individuality; the eclectic assortment of works on

offer could be the products of folk artists, travelling artisans, artists who see visions or hear voices, or men and women who create their work while living behind bars. (Last year's edition of the fair, for example, included surrealist landscapes filled with cartoon characters created by a Kiwi artist who has not uttered a word since early childhood.) More than seventy galleries, from as far afield as Japan, will take part. (Center 548, at 548 W. 22nd St. 212-337-3338.) • At the auction houses, it's a week for lovers of sumptuous landscapes, luminous still-lives, and apple-cheeked Madonnas. Adding lustre to its two-day sale of Old Masters (Jan. 28-29), **Christie's** has nabbed an early Caravaggio: painted shortly after his arrival in Rome from northern Italy, it depicts a young, sweet-faced boy, lit in chiaroscuro, absorbed in

the delicate task of peeling fruit. Other highlights include two views of St. Mark's Square by Canaletto and a depiction of the martyrdom of St. Apollonia—the patron saint of dentists—by Guido Reni. (20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 212-636-2000.) • Spread over three days (Jan. 28-30), **Sotheby's** sales begin with a selection of drawings that includes works by Rubens, Géricault, and Guardi. Most of the works go under the gavel the following day, including a pink-tinged ice-skating scene by the Dutch master Aert Van Der Neer ("Frozen River at Sunset") and a view of the rotunda of the Pantheon by the Roman *vedutista* Giovanni Paolo Panini; another auction offers a group of Renaissance and Mannerist works from the collection of the young Italian dealer Fabrizio Moretti. (York Ave. at 72nd St. 212-606-7000.)

## READINGS AND TALKS

### "Brainwave"

David J. Linden, a professor of neuroscience at the John Hopkins University School of Medicine and the author of "The Compass of Pleasure," talks about his new book, "Touch," with the chef Tom Colicchio, who will also demonstrate how touch and texture affect his cooking. (Rubin Museum of Art, 150 W. 17th St. 212-620-5000. Jan. 28 at 7.)





## TABLES FOR TWO

# BEIJING POP KABOB

122 Mulberry St. (212-966-6206)

IT'S EASY TO PLAY a game of "one of these things is not like the others" on this holdout block of Little Italy between Hester and Canal: Casa Bella, Buona Notte, Il Cortile, Beijing Pop Kabob. It's easy to feel nostalgic for red sauce and cannoli, and for a romanticized neighborhood whose heyday has so definitively passed. But on a January night, when temperatures have dropped into the teens, it's easier still to dart into the clean, bright, tastefully decorated dining room of Beijing Pop Kabob, huddle around one of the ten-odd tables, and start blowing on the tall glass brimming with scalding hot black-and-jasmine tea that you are served immediately.

Warmth is a theme here, with the kitchen turning out the food of Beijing and, more broadly, northern China, where winters are long and cold. The menu has only a small selection of dishes explicitly designated as soup, but many others are liquid-based and served atop Sterno flames, accompanied by small bowls for sharing. "Boiled sliced whole fish in hot chili oil" and the "fisherman's spicy boiled beef with tofu" are indistinguishable but for their main ingredient: a big bony tilapia and oversized, thin-cut swaths of chewy beef, respectively. Both come in the same rich red stock, crowded with silky tofu, mandolined celery, and floppy wood-ear mushrooms, like deflated miniature parachutes. Homemade Beijing noodles with "shrimps and peanuts paste" turn out to be linguine-width and bathed in a thick, peanutty pork gravy; the same noodles with "chicken and shrimp paste" come in what's essentially a bland but comforting egg-drop soup. Most effective of all may be the stewed duck in beer, for which the bird, skin on and bones in, is hacked into chunks and boiled in a lager-heavy broth, which is piping hot and yet still tastes and smells intensely alcoholic.

Dishes marked with a thumbs-up are "what is nice"; a flame indicates "optional spicy or not." Some get both, including the namesake kabobs: plump cubes of chicken, beef, or lamb grilled into juicy caramelized meat candy on a stick, tangy with cumin and chili. It's difficult to grow rice in northern China's dry climate, but wheat is put to good use in steamed dumplings and fluffy pan-fried buns, both filled with pork and leeks, and floury scallion pancakes rolled up around cold-cut-thin slices of pork belly and sticks of carrot and daikon. A nest of flaky, savory "crispy pan-fried cake" is not entirely unlike Italian fried dough, finished with sesame seeds instead of powdered sugar. Little Italy may be dwindling, but in some ways the city stays the same. On a recent evening, a group of three left Beijing Pop Kabob in search of a taxi to the West Village. The driver of a stretch limo idling on the corner rolled down his window. "I'll take you. Ten dollars," he said. "Each."

—Hannah Goldfield

Open daily for lunch and dinner. Dishes \$1.75-\$38.

## FOOD & DRINK

### BAR TAB STANDINGS

43 E. 7th St. (212-420-0671)

This tiny, beloved East Village sports bar—eleven barstools, three tables, a pair of seats from Shea Stadium—has the dark-wood intimacy of a church vestibule, and it welcomes all affiliations. The décor, a riot of memorabilia, is more discriminating: no pinstripes. Triangle pennants, fatheads, and growl towels hang from the ceiling. There's a Phillie Phanatic coloring book, a Mets popcorn box, a UConn Huskies banner, a mini hockey stick. On the walls, eight flat-screen TVs blare ("Always game sound. We HATE music!" the bar's business card reads), and meticulously updated chalkboards display league standings. The other night, a man in an "I LIKE BEER" T-shirt showed up for the Colts-Broncos N.F.L. playoff game. Standings likes beer, too: there are ten craft beers on tap (recently, Yonkers Lager, Scrimshaw, and Bronx Session I.P.A. were among them), and Bud Light if you're pacing yourself. It also sells beef jerky, encourages takeout, and often provides free pizza, which helps keep conversation sharp. "Calling a sportscaster un-American—that's like Joe McCarthy," a burly man at the bar said. Somebody else mentioned "Gravity's Rainbow." The next night—the college-football national championship—Oregon and Ohio State fans, many dressed in red, packed the bar well before kickoff. Around halftime, two agnostics got up and left, amazing a group of the standing faithful. One man eyed their table with glee. "That's a game-changer," he said.

—Sarah Larson



**“Astonishing...in one novel, July tells us more about our universal need to be loved, and our ability to love and be loved, than most earthbound authors will in a lifetime.”**

**—Elissa Schappell, *Vanity Fair***

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## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT HERE

Office workers will pick a neighborhood clean. Like rain-forest villagers, they explore the surrounding jungle and ply the gathering grounds. Sometimes the local establishments go out of business, but mostly they enter the rotation and stay there. A routine settles in—coffee here, burger there, Citibank, Duane Reade, the salty snacks at Jimmy's Corner, the pork bellies at Szechuan Gourmet. If you're the type to count the steps you take each morning on the trek from apartment to subway platform (third I-beam in, rear car), and then on to lobby and desk, you find that the number hardly varies. After a while, you stop looking around.

Looming absence makes the eye grow keener. Last week, the staff of *The New Yorker* made its final preparations to leave 4 Times Square, its headquarters for the past fifteen years, to join the rest of Condé Nast, the parent company, down at 1 World Trade Center, the new megatower in lower Manhattan. The move took place over the weekend. Suddenly, in the days leading up to it, you savored some of the things that you'd taken for granted. A lunchtime walk west for a mandoo bowl led past the Lyric and the big blown-up posters of the dance numbers from "On the Town": all this time, Broadway, right under our noses. The International Center of Photography gift shop, the surfing videos outside Quicksilver, the elevators at the Marriott. *O Bank of America security guard, in thy geriatric shades!*

Your fondness for the neighborhood the magazine is leaving behind might depend on when you got here or what version of it sticks in the mind. *The New Yorker* has been in the area for all ninety of its years, but many, if not most, of us have known only the 4 Times Square chapter. Some, as teen-agers in the nineteen-eighties, oblivious of the existence of a Mr. Shawn, might have

seen Times Square as a place to buy nunchuks, get mugged, or sneak into a movie house to see Vanessa del Rio. Or else, younger still, we know only the millennial theme-park edition, purified of porn by Rudolph Giuliani and of cars (on some blocks) by Michael Bloomberg, but a gantlet still, if you object to the molestations of sooty Elmos and lumpy Spider-Men, or find sad the forbearing expressions of tourists who can't remember why they felt it necessary to come here. Then, there are the islands of safety—the Red Flame diner, say, still sincere in spite of a series of face-lifts, or the Kinokuniya Japanese bookstore, across from Bryant Park, a place to browse books without feeling any guilt about not reading them. And Bryant Park itself, with its pétanque courts and the crazy haphazard arrangements of bistro chairs. It smarts a bit to think of such spots out of our lives, like kids off at college.

As for the older stomping grounds, the lore hangs around. Before 4 Times Square and the decade or so at 20 West Forty-third Street, the magazine spent more than fifty years at 25 West Forty-third Street. That's the building with the "Literary Landmark" plaque out front, which, backward-runningly, depicts the place as having been a Luddites' den: "Characteristic of the magazine was a suspicion of advanced technology." Brendan Gill, describing the office's "bureaucratic squalor," called it "penitentiary-like," but more beguiling is what went on outside the prison walls, in the old Theatre District haunts: the Algonquin, the Century, the Teheran; Joe Mitchell and A. J. Liebling at the Red Devil, dining on baby squid; all the editors dressed up and out every night for dinner and a show, under the watchful eyes of policemen on horseback. It was acceptable in those days to pass a woman on the street and say, "Great hat." The whole publishing



industry was basically within a one-mile radius, to the printed word what Wall Street was to capital formation or Hollywood to motion pictures. (It's funny that there was never really a commensurate term for it, unless you count "New York.") There was squalor, to be sure, but what passes down is a sense of glamour and exaltation of a kind that you won't find in the Times Square of Red Lobster and the Naked Cowboy. In the end, it's not that hard to leave.

Frankly, it was harder to get ready to leave. As a prelude to the move, the staff, told that it would have to travel light, spent weeks purging offices of the detritus of the decades. Some of it was easy to bid goodbye to: here and there a shrine of exotic booze (flask of Ugandan banana gin, anyone?) or a Cornell-box assemblage of promotional doodads. The things we keep around! But mostly it was paper, whole forests' worth. Thousands upon thousands of orphaned books, some hoarded for novelty appeal, or a nascent interest, or a bygone assignment, or out of allegiance to (or guilt about) writer friends—an "accretion of intention," as one acquaintance put it—were trucked off to Housing Works and the like. Many more perfectly good books were sent to their doom, like so many unclaimed stray dogs. (An uncommercial thought: a secondhand bookshop called Perfectly Good Books.)

Meanwhile, bins arrived empty and left bulging with

the chaff from cabinets and drawers full of interview transcripts, Nexis printouts, page proofs, fan mail, hate mail, expense receipts, collegial gags, and photocopies of the faces of now grown toddlers smushed on the photocopier glass. The process felt a little like going through the belongings of a dead loved one, except that the dead loved one was you. What was worth saving? Not as much as you'd anticipated, once you got into the spirit of paperlessness. Pile up those mine carts with fool's gold. The thing that's worth keeping is the thing you do next.

This week, our first downtown, we're exiting unfamiliar subway stations via the wrong stairwells and blinking in a strange abundance of daylight and saltier air. Our new offices are tidy, now that we've got through the purge. Our step may be a little springier, since we've lightened the weight (blessed or not) of our history. The disorientation that attends the first night in a new apartment may stay with us for weeks, especially when we're thirty-eight floors up, but we'll make the place our own before long. We'll hoard new stuff. Not far off are Chinatown, Governors Island, and Wall Street's narrow shadowy tributaries, with oddball shops in the eddies, glimpses of old New York. It will be cool to watch the summer storms roll in.

—Nick Paumgarten

## INK ELEMENTARY



Kareem Abdul-Jabbar walked through the lobby of his hotel on Central Park South recently, doing his best impression of someone with a low profile. He swerved to avoid a chandelier (low clearance for a former N.B.A. center), then bumped into an old friend who'd been a coach with the Chicago Bulls. Handshakes, camera flashes. Finally, Abdul-Jabbar wriggled free. "I have somewhere to be," he said, adjusting a white cashmere scarf over his blue pin-striped suit. He ducked through a doorway, took a few loping steps to the curb, and scrunched into the back of a black Suburban.

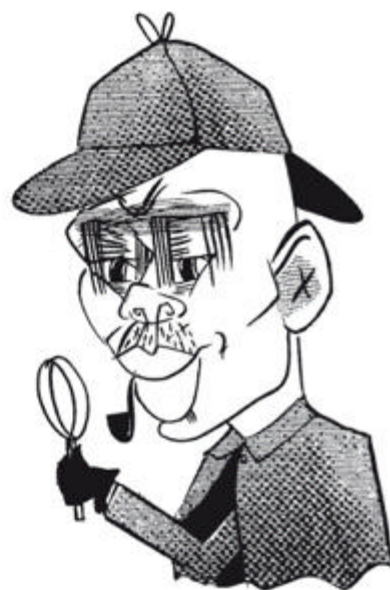
He was late for cocktails at the Yale Club, where the Baker Street Irregulars, an eighty-one-year-old Sherlock Holmes society, was hosting its annual dinner. Abdul-Jabbar—a Sherlockian since he began reading Sir Arthur Conan Doyle as a rookie with the Milwaukee Bucks, in 1969—was making

his inaugural appearance. Earlier that week, Abdul-Jabbar had announced that he would soon publish his first novel, "Mycroft Holmes," a thriller about Sherlock Holmes's older brother. Conan Doyle's Mycroft is old and haggard, "world-weary," Abdul-Jabbar said. "We want to see how he was before he took his lumps from the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune."

The car crept through midtown, and Abdul-Jabbar said, "I'm curious just to see who these people are." He did an impression of Jonny Lee Miller, the latest incarnation of Sherlock Holmes, on the CBS show "Elementary." "I am not a nice man. I am acerbic. I get things done in my style," he said, in a plummy English accent.

Abdul-Jabbar was raised in Harlem, but he lives in Los Angeles. "I first read these books on the beach in San Diego when we were playing the Rockets," he said. "Holmes saw clues where other people saw nothing." From then on, he imagined himself as a courtside sleuth. He recalled going up against Manute Bol, one of the tallest players in N.B.A. history. "He was the only guy I had to look up to. So I figured out his weaknesses," he said. "I make deductions. That's what I do.

Hey, I read Sherlock Holmes." In the Holmes stories, the Baker Street Irregulars are a group of street urchins who pass along intelligence to the detective. Abdul-Jabbar lifted tips from ball boys. One time, he heard them complaining about how Bob Lanier—the six-foot-eleven Moriarty of the Detroit Pistons—would sneak cigarettes during halftime. "I knew, if Lanier was smoking, if I made him



Kareem Abdul-Jabbar



run in the second half he'd be in pain," he said. "These are the little clues I pick up."

Abdul-Jabbar walked into the Yale Club. "I'm here for Holmes," he told a bewildered doorman, who waved him to an elevator. On the twentieth floor, he entered a ballroom, where two hundred people were holding highballs and exchanging arcana about their man. In Conan Doyle's day, the Sherlockians drove the author to the edge of madness. He once tried to kill off Holmes to keep the fanatics at bay.

On a table by the entrance were nametags: King of Bohemia, The Red Circle, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. Society members have their own aliases, or "investitures," culled from the Holmes stories. "These used to all be story titles, but we ran out," said Leslie Klinger (Abbey Grange), the editor of a Holmes anthology and Abdul-Jabbar's attorney. "One of the investitures is Smack, Smack, Smack," he said, after a bug-squashing character in the story "The Adventure of the Copper Beeches." Klinger, who wore a tuxedo, tried to whisper into his client's ear but wound up shouting: "Kareem, there's someone here who wants you to do a podcast about Mycroft!" Abdul-Jabbar was being accosted by Inspector Baynes, whose alias refers to a character from the Surrey Constabulary, and Vincent Spaulding, named for one of Conan Doyle's criminals. "The Bucks need you," a Sherlockian from Oshkosh pleaded with Abdul-Jabbar, before staggering away. The Irregulars meet only once a year, and their exuberance showed.

Corporal Henry Wood offered an outstretched hand and asked Abdul-Jabbar about his novel. "It all started with a book called 'Enter the Lion,' Mycroft's posthumous memoir," he said. Corporal Henry Wood knew it well. "But of course, edited by my dear friend. A great book. Preach on!" Then the Corporal pulled out a selfie stick and waved it up toward Abdul-Jabbar. "Mind if we take a photo?"

"What is that contraption?" Abbey Grange asked.

"I guess it was inevitable," Abdul-Jabbar said, more of the stick than of the selfie. Holmes wasn't one for gadgetry.

Dinner was announced, and the Irregulars repaired to the dining room, two floors below, where the Sherlockian rites would commence. There would be a toast to Dr. Watson's second wife, a reading from "The Adventure of the Musgrave Ritual," and a tribute to the society's fallen members, in an installment called "Stand with Me Here Upon the Terrace." Secrets had to be kept. With a nod, Abdul-Jabbar strode off to the back stairway.

—Jonathan Blitzer

## RAG TRADE THE ATHLEISURE CLASS



Seventeen years ago, in distant Canada, a sports-apparel seller named Chip Wilson had a vision. What if you made yoga clothes so stylish that you'd want to wear them all day? The result, Lululemon, ushered in a new era: the decline of jeans, the rise of spandex, and the practice—some might argue the scourge—of women going about their day dressed for an Ashtanga class. Wilson and his wife, Shannon, a designer he'd hired, became billionaires, though the past few years have presented setbacks. He resigned from Lululemon's board last year, after a disastrous episode involving unintentionally see-through yoga pants. (Attempting to explain the glitch to a television reporter, he blamed a "rubbing through the thighs.") But, in general, things are good. "It's funny," Shannon Wilson said the other day. "I walk down the street, and I see women in their tights and their running shoes and a jacket, and I think, We started that!"

The Wilsons were in town for a party to celebrate the New York launch of Shannon's newest venture, Kit and Ace. Lululemon makes yoga clothes that can be worn on the street. Kit and Ace makes street clothes—cashmere sweaters, pants—with the comfy qualities of gym wear: washability, stretchiness, underarm vents. "What I think everybody's looking for is the

performance that you get in your athletic clothes," Shannon said. She has blond hair and was dressed in one of her own white tops and narrow-cut dress pants. The new Kit and Ace store, which is in Nolita, had a Zen atmosphere: bleached-pine interiors, a d.j. playing house music. A sign said "#timeisprecious."

Shannon and Chip, who has a thick neck and looks like a mountain man, were accompanied by a third Wilson: JJ, Chip's son from a previous marriage, who is Shannon's business partner. (Chip is an informal adviser.) JJ is twenty-six, but, he said, growing up in his parents' stores, he has a lifetime of experience. Chip said, "I think we're probably the family that knows more about technical retail apparel than any three people on the planet."

As employees readied the store for the party, the Wilsons talked about their lives back in Vancouver. They have three other sons: Duke, who is eleven, and identical twins, who are nine. "Sports are a theme," Shannon said. JJ teaches spin classes. Shannon is on a swim team. Chip climbs a nearby mountain trail, called Grouse Grind: "It's nature's StairMaster."

After Lululemon's success, Chip said, "Quite frankly, we came into some money, and we started buying luxury clothing." Cashmere, he said, was "all I wanted to wear." But it would pill and wear out. This produced the inspiration for a material that Shannon calls "qemir"—cashmere that can go in the washing machine, making it suitable for a "full-contact life style."

JJ oversees branding for the Kit and Ace line. The name, he explained, refers to two imaginary "muses" that he and Shannon came up with. Kit is the name Shannon would have given a daughter (for Vancouver's Kitsilano beach, "where all my dreams came true," she said). "I think of Kit as Shannon in her heyday," JJ said. "An artist at heart, a creator. A West Coast girl. An athlete." Ace, her masculine counterpart, is "a West Coast guy. He likes things that are easy and carefree." He filled out the picture: Ace surfs. "He's graduated college. He's thirty-two. He's maybe dating The One."

Could Ace be modelled on JJ? His

parents teased. "He's a bit of a pain in the ass!" Shannon said.

"A little pretentious," Chip said, laughing.

The Kit and Ace stores vary by location, but each will have one personal touch: an eight-by-eight-foot table, which is the same size table that the Wilsons have in each of their four houses. Managers will be required to throw monthly dinner parties at the stores for the "creative community." Chip pointed to a box of cards on a shelf. The cards are for a game called Real Talk, which the Wilsons invented to spur dinner conversation. For example, JJ said, "What's one thing you've done that you've never told your parents?"

Chip: "What are the shoes that your man wears indicative of?"

"Do you believe in monogamy?" Shannon said. "Someone got that the other night. His wife was sitting right next to us."

The guests were arriving—young retail people dressed in dark, casual clothing. The Wilsons looked on approvingly. Chip said, "Ten to fifteen years from now, it will be indistinguishable what is street wear and what is athletic wear."

Is there any chance that the athletic look could end up being a fad?

Chip laughed. "Ha!" he said.

Shannon chimed in, "That's what people said about Lululemon!"

—Lizzie Widdicombe

## DISAMBIGUATION DEPT.

### À LA CARTE



We used to parse liner notes for cultural significance. Now we look to menus: a Brooklyn restaurant's Kim and Kanye-themed prix fixes for Valentine's Day (Karrat terrine with dill kreme fraîche and a Midori shot, "Imma Let You Finish" for dessert), a New Jersey casino's awkward "Martin Luther King, Jr. Special" (fried chicken, collard greens). Dan Jurafsky's new book, "The Language of Food: A Linguist Reads the Menu," is full of such tidbits. Toasts are called "toasts," he writes, because, until the seventeenth century, wine and ale were often flavored with grilled bread. People talk about expensive meals using sex metaphors; for noodle joints and cupcake counters, they resort to drug lingo. The more Yelp reviewers mention dessert, the more stars they will give. The longer the words a restaurant uses to describe a dish on its menu, the more the dish will cost—an increase of one letter in the average word length corresponds to a price increase of eighteen cents. One of his findings is less ironclad. He writes, "I suppose linguists can be annoying dinner companions."

Jurafsky was in London recently—visiting from San Francisco; he's a pro-

fessor of computer science and the chair of the linguistics department at Stanford—so a reporter decided to put his hypothesis to the test. It was a misty night. Jurafsky; his wife, Janet Yu, a biologist; and the reporter agreed to meet at the Queen's Arms, a teal-fronted pub in Kensington. Jurafsky and Yu arrived by taxi and settled in at a table near the fireplace.

"The cabbie told us, 'Don't order fish-and-chips anywhere it doesn't come on paper,'" Jurafsky said.

He picked up the menu. "I think I'm going to have either the sausage or the cottage pie," he said. "What would be fun?" The menu-reading began in earnest. One item in the "To start, snack, or share" section was "Salt & pepper squid with a spicy mayonnaise dip."

"The high-end places don't use 'and' anymore—they use ampersands," Jurafsky said. He scanned the Mains section, which included "Southern fried chicken with fries, coleslaw & a house pickle dip."

"The foreign homey dish—that's kind of meta," he said.

"Southern Great Britain?" Yu asked.

Jurafsky decided that he was going to go for the chicken, before pointing out that the pub capitalized Chorizo and Mozzarella, and referred to focaccia as "Focaccia bread."

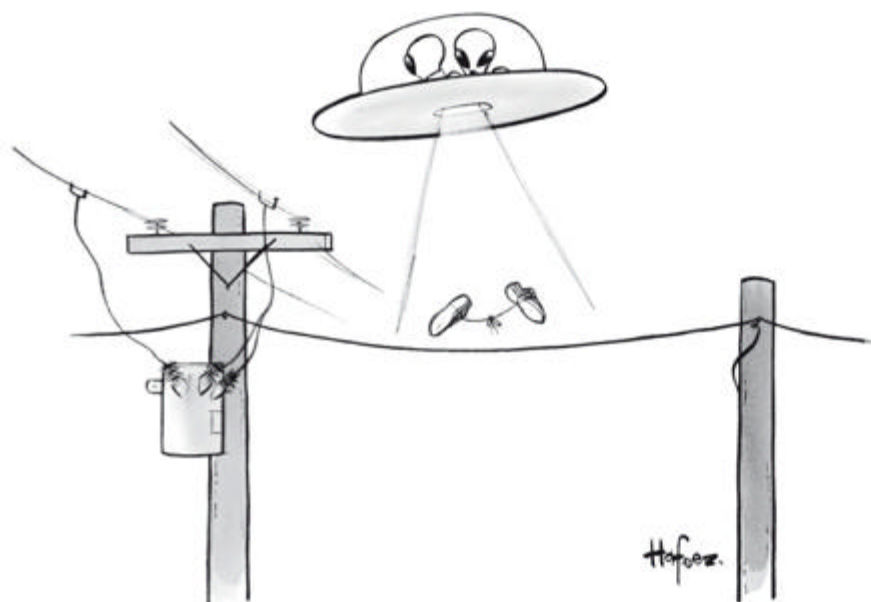
"The fact that they're translating 'focaccia' for you is a way of being less pretentious. I find that very friendly," he said.

When the chicken arrived, Jurafsky noted that its provenance had not been advertised, despite the menu's mention of Cherry Orchard sausages and West Country beef. It was his belief that the vogue for identifying the source of meats, having trickled down to less prestigious restaurants, might soon face a backlash.

He said, "With 'free-range,' you usually use it with the whole animal and not the ground-up animal."

The reporter said she'd read somewhere that Fortnum & Mason was going to start selling "bespoke honey."

"That's a linguistic filler," Jurafsky said, deploying one of the terms from his book. He found that for each instance of linguistic filler—words like "tasty," "mouthwatering," and "savory"—the average price of a dish is nine per cent less. He was relieved to find that, even though



"A little lower."



the menu promised “twice-cooked chips,” there was no use of the phrase “freshly grilled,” which in foodese, he explained, might indicate just the opposite.

Jurafsky and Yu reminisced about their first date, which consisted of building a duck smoker based on instructions from a YouTube video. At the moment, they explained, they had a fried-chicken contest going.

“Let’s get all the data,” Jurafsky said. He took a piece of paper and made a little scorecard. The categories were skin crispness, skin taste, over-all greasiness, meat taste, and meat dryness or lack thereof. He and Yu nibbled the drumsticks, pausing between bites, brows furrowed, to record their feedback on the grid.

“I would like a little more flour—just a little,” he said.

A thought occurred, a line for future research. “Why do only cheap restaurants have pictures on their menus?” Jurafsky asked, suggesting that linguists are, at the very least, interesting people to have dinner with.

—Lauren Collins

## THE MUSICAL LIFE FREE



“How come they never show an indigenous person using the Internet?” Tanya Tagaq remarked on a recent Sunday visit to the Museum of the American Indian, at Bowling Green. “We’re not only in the past. We’re here right now.”

Tagaq, who is thirty-nine and has jet-black hair and a girlish face, had removed her sealskin boots and was sitting barefoot on the floor of the Diker Pavilion, a large oval space on the museum’s ground level. A couple of mothers were browsing the exhibition cases while, nearer Tagaq, their young children mimicked the traditional Indian dances that were being projected on the curving wall of the room.

“They should put me in one of those cases,” Tagaq said. “I’d be like—” and she flipped the bird with both hands, grinning mischievously.

Tagaq is an Inuit throat singer, and she was in the city for a performance at Joe’s Pub: a jaw-dropping forty-five minutes of guttural heaves, juddering howls, and murderous shrieks—Inuit folk meets Karen Finley. The show was as remarkable for its fearless lack of inhibition as for Tagaq’s technical skill and her mastery of tradition. In her work, which includes collaborations with Björk and the Kronos Quartet, Tagaq uses breath and, more recently, vocalized shrieks and moans. She is known throughout Canada (her home is in Yellowknife, in the Northern Territories), and she won the 2014 Polaris Prize for album of the year, beating out Drake and Arcade Fire. The album, “Animism,” has just been released Stateside—her first U.S. record.

Tagaq’s mother was born and raised in an igloo on Baffin Island, in Nunavut Territory, but Tagaq, whose father is British and Polish, grew up in a house, in Cambridge Bay. She didn’t hear throat singing until her mother gave her a cassette of two Inuit women doing it in the traditional manner, as a duet. “I heard the land in the voices,” she explained. She began to imitate the sounds, performing both parts. “It became my form of self-acceptance,” she went on. “I never had any designs on being a professional singer. It was just something I did—for years, in the shower, and in my room alone.”

In 2003, while attending a mid-night-sun arts festival in Nunavut, Tagaq was drinking around a campfire with the festival’s director. “And I said, ‘Check this shit out,’ and I started throat singing. And the next day the main act couldn’t come, and the festival director said, ‘Would you be comfortable just going up and jamming?’ And I was like—*yeah*.” At Joe’s Pub, she looked more comfortable than many in the audience. “To be honest, it’s hard to make me feel uncomfortable,” she admitted.

Friends of Björk’s happened to be attending the festival, and a couple of weeks later Tagaq got a call from the artist’s manager, who wanted to fly her to New York to work with Björk. On arriving in the city for the first time, “I was so touched at the accomplishments of humanity,” Tagaq said. “And to this day I get touched. I see someone behind the counter where I’m buying my water, and I’m like, ‘You’re fucking *awesome*!’”

Björk took Tagaq on tour with her. “It was wonderful,” Tagaq said. “But I didn’t know the world yet. I got pregnant from a man I met onstage and moved to the Basque country, and when my baby was four months old Björk flew me to the Canary Islands to record ‘Medúlla,’” Björk’s sixth album.

In recent years, Tagaq has become more political, speaking out on a range of Inuit social ills engendered by co-



Tanya Tagaq

lonialism and racism. At some shows, she projects the names of twelve hundred indigenous women missing or murdered since 1980 as she sings. “My daughters are four times more likely to be murdered than any other racial demographic in Canada,” she said at the museum. “So how do I change this, how do I help? That’s what I’m projecting my voice for.”

Tagaq has no formal music training, and she said that the Kronos Quartet’s leader, David Harrington, “made me promise never to learn my notes. ‘Millions of people know all that stuff,’ he told me. ‘You’re completely free. Don’t let it shackle you.’” She added, “Our whole society is based on control. I want to live like I’m free.”

Being free includes wearing seal, an important Inuit resource. “The people are being denied our natural resource because Paul McCartney thinks seals are cute? Fuck right off!” Then: “Sorry!” she said to a little boy who was staring at her. The kid’s mom shooed him away. Indians in cases are safer.

—John Seabrook

# THE PURSUIT OF BEAUTY

*Yitang Zhang solves a pure-math mystery.*

BY ALEC WILKINSON



I don't see what difference it can make now to reveal that I passed high-school math only because I cheated. I could add and subtract and multiply and divide, but I entered the wilderness when words became equations and x's and y's. On test days, I sat next to Bob Isner or Bruce Gelfand or Ted Chapman or Donny Chamberlain—smart boys whose handwriting I could read—and divided my attention between his desk and the teacher's eyes. Having skipped me, the talent for math concentrated extravagantly in one of my nieces, Amie Wilkinson, a professor at the University of Chicago. From Amie I first heard about Yitang Zhang, a solitary, part-time cal-

culus teacher at the University of New Hampshire who received several prizes, including a MacArthur award in September, for solving a problem that had been open for more than a hundred and fifty years.

The problem that Zhang chose, in 2010, is from number theory, a branch of pure mathematics. Pure mathematics, as opposed to applied mathematics, is done with no practical purposes in mind. It is as close to art and philosophy as it is to engineering. "My result is useless for industry," Zhang said. The British mathematician G. H. Hardy wrote in 1940 that mathematics is, of "all the arts and sciences, the most aus-

tere and the most remote." Bertrand Russell called it a refuge from "the dreary exile of the actual world." Hardy believed emphatically in the precise aesthetics of math. A mathematical proof, such as Zhang produced, "should resemble a simple and clear-cut constellation," he wrote, "not a scattered cluster in the Milky Way." Edward Frenkel, a math professor at the University of California, Berkeley, says Zhang's proof has "a renaissance beauty," meaning that though it is deeply complex, its outlines are easily apprehended. The pursuit of beauty in pure mathematics is a tenet. Last year, neuroscientists in Great Britain discovered that the same part of the brain that is activated by art and music was activated in the brains of mathematicians when they looked at math they regarded as beautiful.

Zhang's problem is often called "bound gaps." It concerns prime numbers—those which can be divided cleanly only by one and by themselves: two, three, five, seven, and so on—and the question of whether there is a boundary within which, on an infinite number of occasions, two consecutive prime numbers can be found, especially out in the region where the numbers are so large that it would take a book to print a single one of them. Daniel Goldston, a professor at San Jose State University; János Pintz, a fellow at the Alfréd Rényi Institute of Mathematics, in Budapest; and Cem Yıldırım, of Boğaziçi University, in Istanbul, working together in 2005, had come closer than anyone else to establishing whether there might be a boundary, and what it might be. Goldston didn't think he'd see the answer in his lifetime. "I thought it was impossible," he told me.

Zhang, who also calls himself Tom, had published only one paper, to quiet acclaim, in 2001. In 2010, he was fifty-five. "No mathematician should ever allow himself to forget that mathematics, more than any other art or science, is a young man's game," Hardy wrote. He also wrote, "I do not know of an instance of a major mathematical advance initiated by a man past fifty." Zhang had received a Ph.D. in algebraic geometry from Purdue in 1991. His adviser, T. T. Moh, with whom he parted unhappily, recently wrote a description on his Web site of Zhang as

*Unable to get an academic position, Zhang kept the books for a Subway franchise.*



a graduate student: "When I looked into his eyes, I found a disturbing soul, a burning bush, an explorer who wanted to reach the North Pole." Zhang left Purdue without Moh's support, and, having published no papers, was unable to find an academic job. He lived, sometimes with friends, in Lexington, Kentucky, where he had occasional work, and in New York City, where he also had friends and occasional work. In Kentucky, he became involved with a group interested in Chinese democracy. Its slogan was "Freedom, Democracy, Rule of Law, and Pluralism." A member of the group, a chemist in a lab, opened a Subway franchise as a means of raising money. "Since Tom was a genius at numbers," another member of the group told me, "he was invited to help him." Zhang kept the books. "Sometimes, if it was busy at the store, I helped with the cash register," Zhang told me recently. "Even I knew how to make the sandwiches, but I didn't do it so much." When Zhang wasn't working, he would go to the library at the University of Kentucky and read journals in algebraic geometry and number theory. "For years, I didn't really keep up my dream in mathematics," he said.

"You must have been unhappy."

He shrugged. "My life is not always easy," he said.

With a friend's help, Zhang eventually got his position in New Hampshire, in 1999. Having chosen bound gaps in 2010, he was uncertain of how to find a way into the problem. "I am thinking, Where is the door?" Zhang said. "In the history of this problem, many mathematicians believed that there should be a door, but they couldn't find it. I tried several doors. Then I start to worry a little that there is no door."

"Were you ever frustrated?"

"I was tired," he said. "But many times I just feel peaceful. I like to walk and think. This is my way. My wife would see me and say, 'What are you doing?' I said, 'I'm working, I'm thinking.' She didn't understand. She said, 'What do you mean?'" The problem was so complicated, he said, that "I had no way to tell her."

According to Deane Yang, a professor of mathematics at the New York University Polytechnic School of En-

gineering, a mathematician at the beginning of a difficult problem is "trying to maneuver his way into a maze. When you try to prove a theorem, you can almost be totally lost to knowing exactly where you want to go. Often, when you find your way, it happens in a moment, then you live to do it again."

Zhang is deeply reticent, and his manner is formal and elaborately polite. Recently, when we were walking, he said, "May I use these?" He meant a pair of clip-on shades, which he held toward me as if I might want to examine them first. His enthusiasm for answering questions about himself and his work is slight. About half an hour after I had met him for the first time, he said, "I have a question." We had been talking about his childhood. He said, "How many more questions you going to have?" He depends heavily on three responses: "Maybe," "Not so much," and "Maybe not so much." From diffidence, he often says "we" instead of "I," as in, "We may not think this approach is so important." Occasionally, preparing to speak, he hums. After he published his result, he was invited to spend six months at the Institute for Advanced Study, in Princeton. The filmmaker George Csicsery has made a documentary about Zhang, called "Counting to Infinity," for the Mathematical Sciences Research Institute, in Berkeley, California. In it, Peter Sarnak, a member of the Institute for Advanced Study, says that one day he ran into Zhang and said hello, and Zhang said hello, then Zhang said that it was the first word he'd spoken to anyone in ten days. Sarnak thought that was excessive, even for a mathematician, and he invited Zhang to have lunch once a week.

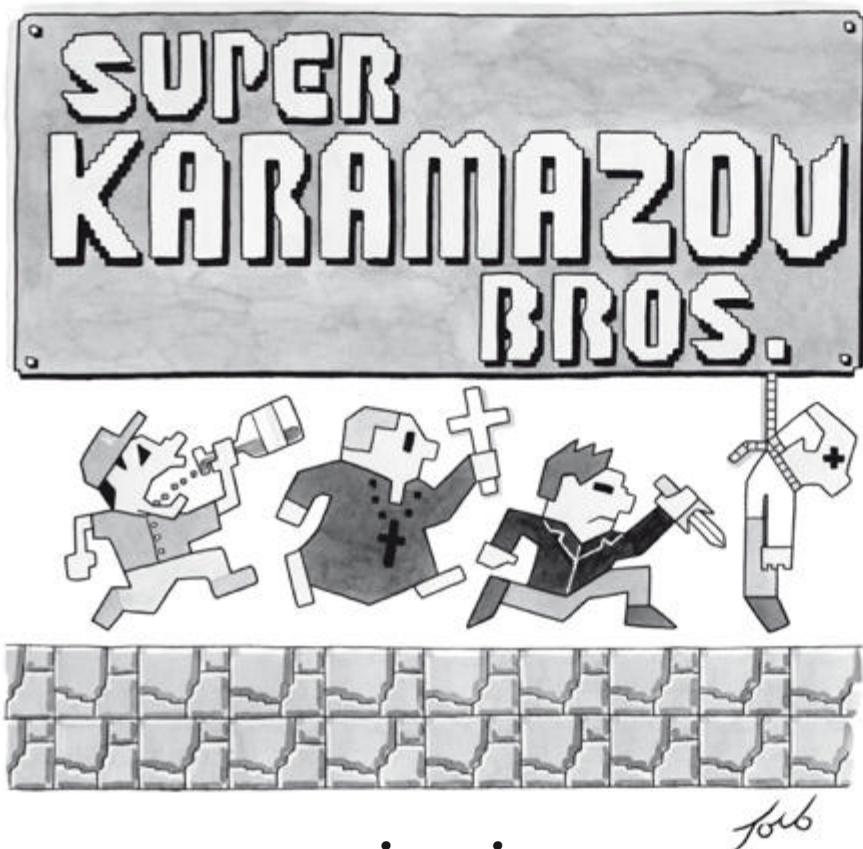
Matthew Emerton, a professor of math at the University of Chicago, also met Zhang at Princeton. "I wouldn't say he was a standard person," Emerton told me. "He wasn't gregarious. I got the impression of him being reasonably internal. He had received another prize, so the people around him were talking about that. Probably most mathematicians are very low-key about getting a prize, because you're not in it for the prize, but he seemed particularly low-key. It didn't seem to affect him at all."

Deane Yang attended three lectures that Zhang gave at Columbia in 2013. "You expect a guy like that to want to show off or explain how smart he is," Yang said. "He gave beautiful lectures, where he wasn't trying to show off at all." The first talk that Zhang gave on his result was at Harvard, before the result was published. A professor there, Shing-Tung Yau, heard about Zhang's paper, and invited him. About fifty people showed up. One of them, a Harvard math professor, thought Zhang's talk was "pretty incomprehensible." He added, "The problem is that this stuff is hard to talk about, because everything hinges on some delicate technical understandings." Another Harvard professor, Barry Mazur, told me that he was "moved by his intensity and how brave and independent he seemed to be."

In New Hampshire, Zhang works in an office on the third floor of the math and computer-science building. His office has a desk, a computer, two chairs, a whiteboard, and some bookshelves. Through a window he looks into the branches of an oak tree. The books on his shelves have titles such as "An Introduction to Hilbert Space" and "Elliptic Curves, Modular Forms, and Fermat's Last Theorem." There are also books on modern history and on Napoleon, who fascinates him, and copies of Shakespeare, which he reads in Chinese, because it's easier than Elizabethan English.

Eric Grinberg, the chairman of the math department at the University of Massachusetts Boston, was a colleague of Zhang's in New Hampshire from 2003 to 2010. "Tom was very modest, very unassuming, never asked for anything," Grinberg told me. "We knew he was working on something important. He uses paper and a pencil, but the only copy was on his computer, and about once a month I would go in and ask, 'Do you mind if I make a backup?' Of course, it's all in his head anyway. He's above average in that."

Zhang's memory is abnormally retentive. A friend of his named Jacob Chi said, "I take him to a party sometimes. He doesn't talk, he's absorbing everybody. I say, 'There's a human decency; you must talk to people, please.' He says, 'I enjoy your conversation.' Six months later, he can say who sat where



and who started a conversation, and he can repeat what they said.”

“I may think socializing is a way to waste time,” Zhang says. “Also, maybe I’m a little shy.”

A few years ago, Zhang sold his car, because he didn’t really use it. He rents an apartment about four miles from campus and rides to and from his office with students on a school shuttle. He says that he sits on the bus and thinks. Seven days a week, he arrives at his office around eight or nine and stays until six or seven. The longest he has taken off from thinking is two weeks. Sometimes he wakes in the morning thinking of a math problem he had been considering when he fell asleep. Outside his office is a long corridor that he likes to walk up and down. Otherwise, he walks outside.

Zhang met his wife, to whom he has been married for twelve years, at a Chinese restaurant on Long Island, where she was a waitress. Her name is Yaling, but she calls herself Helen. A friend who knew them both took Zhang to the restaurant and pointed her out. “He asked, ‘What do you think of this girl?’” Zhang said. Meanwhile, she was considering him. To court her, Zhang went

to New York every weekend for several months. The following summer, she came to New Hampshire. She didn’t like the winters, though, and moved to California, where she works at a beauty salon. She and Zhang have a house in San Jose, and he spends school vacations there.

Until Zhang was promoted to professor, last year, as a consequence of his proof, his appointment had been tenuous. “I was chair of the math department, and I had to go to him from time to time and remind him this was not a permanent position,” Eric Grinberg said. “We were grateful to him, but it’s not guaranteed. He always said that he very much appreciated the time he had spent in New Hampshire.”

**Z**hang devoted himself to bound gaps for a couple of years without finding a door. “We couldn’t see any hope,” he said. Then, on July 3, 2012, in the middle of the afternoon, “within five or ten minutes, the way is open.”

Zhang was in Pueblo, Colorado, visiting his friend Jacob Chi, who is a music professor at Colorado State University-Pueblo. A few months earlier, Chi had reminded Zhang that he had promised

one day to teach his son, Julius, calculus, and since Julius was about to be a senior in high school Chi had called and asked, “Do you keep your promise?” Zhang spent a month at the Chis’. Each morning, he and Julius worked for about an hour. “He didn’t have a set curriculum,” Julius told me. “It all just flowed from his memory. He mentioned once that he didn’t have any numbers in his phone book. He memorized them all.”

Zhang had planned a break from work in Colorado, and hadn’t brought any notes with him. On July 3rd, he was walking around the Chis’ back yard. “We live in the mountains, and the deer come out, and he was smoking a cigarette and watching for the deer,” Chi said. “No deer came,” Zhang said. “Just walking and thinking, this is my way.” For about half an hour, he walked around at a loss.

In “The Psychology of Invention in the Mathematical Field,” published in 1945, Jacques Hadamard quotes a mathematician who says, “It often seems to me, especially when I am alone, that I find myself in another world. Ideas of numbers seem to live. Suddenly, questions of any kind rise before my eyes with their answers.” In the back yard, Zhang had a similar experience. “I see numbers, equations, and something even—it’s hard to say what it is,” Zhang said. “Something very special. Maybe numbers, maybe equations—a mystery, maybe a vision. I knew that, even though there were many details to fill in, we should have a proof. Then I went back to the house.”

Zhang didn’t say anything to Chi about his breakthrough. That evening, Chi was conducting a dress rehearsal for a Fourth of July concert in Pueblo, and Zhang went with him. “After the concert, he couldn’t stop humming ‘The Stars and Stripes Forever,’” Chi said. “All he would say was ‘What a great song.’”

**I** asked Zhang, “Are you very smart?” and he said, “Maybe, a little.” He was born in Shanghai in 1955. His mother was a secretary in a government office, and his father was a college professor whose field was electrical engineering. As a small boy, he began “trying to know everything in mathematics,” he said. “I became very thirsty for math.” His parents moved to Beijing for work, and Zhang remained in Shanghai with his



grandmother. The revolution had closed the schools. He spent most of his time reading math books that he ordered from a bookstore for less than a dollar. He was fond of a series whose title he translates as "A Hundred Thousand Questions Why." There were volumes for physics, chemistry, biology, and math. When he didn't understand something, he said, "I tried to solve the problem myself, because no one could help me."

Zhang moved to Beijing when he was thirteen, and when he was fifteen he was sent with his mother to the countryside, to a farm, where they grew vegetables. His father was sent to a farm in another part of the country. If Zhang was seen reading books on the farm, he was told to stop. "People did not think that math was important to the class struggle," he said. After a few years, he returned to Beijing, where he got a job in a factory making locks. He began studying to take the entrance exam for Peking University, China's most respected school: "I spent several months to learn

all the high-school physics and chemistry, and several to learn history. It was a little hurried." He was admitted when he was twenty-three. "The first year, we studied calculus and linear algebra—it was very exciting," Zhang said. "In the last year, I selected number theory as my specialty." Zhang's professor insisted, though, that he change his major to algebraic geometry, his own field. "I studied it, but I didn't really like it," Zhang said. "That time in China, still the idea was like this: the individual has to follow the interest of the whole group, the country. He thought algebraic geometry was more important than number theory. He forced me. He was the university president, so he had the authority."

During the summer of 1984, T. T. Moh visited Peking University from Purdue and invited Zhang and several other students, recommended to him by Chinese professors, to do graduate work in his department. One of Moh's specialties is the Jacobian conjecture, and Zhang was eager to work on it. The

Jacobian conjecture, a problem in algebraic geometry that was introduced in 1939 and is still unsolved, stipulates certain simple conditions that, if satisfied, enable someone to solve a series of complicated equations. It is acknowledged as being beyond the capacities of a graduate student and approachable by only the most accomplished algebraic geometers. A mathematician described it to me as a "disaster problem," for the trouble it has caused. For his thesis, Zhang submitted a weak form of the conjecture, meaning that he attempted to prove something implied by the conjecture, rather than to prove the conjecture itself.

After Zhang received his doctorate, he told Moh that he was returning to number theory. "I was not the happiest," Moh wrote me. "However, I was for the student's right to change fields, so I kept my smile and said bye to him. For the past 22 years, I knew nothing about him."

After graduating, most of the Chinese

An evocative new novel that captures the extraordinary lives of sisters

## Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf

**"FICTION AND HISTORY  
MERGE SEAMLESSLY IN THIS  
DAZZLING NOVEL."**

—*Entertainment Weekly*

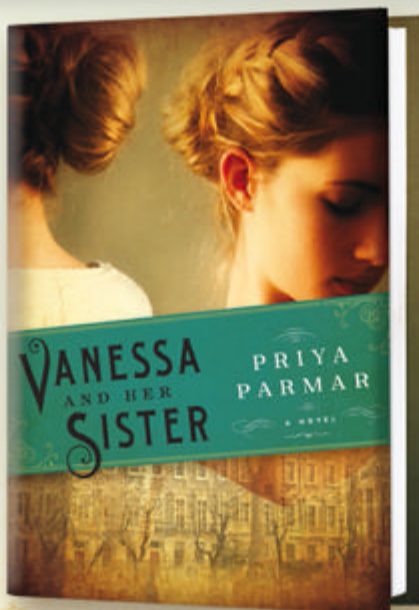
**"YOU'LL BE SPELLBOUND..."**

reimagines the brilliant, fragile  
writer and her turn-of-the-  
century bohemian friends."

—*People*

**"ILLUMINATES VIRGINIA  
WOOLF'S BACKSTORY FROM  
A STRIKING PERSPECTIVE."**

—*Elle*



**"A VIBRANT FICTIONAL  
HOMAGE."**

—*O: The Oprah Magazine*

**"AN UNCANNY SUCCESS..."**

Parmar gives truth and definition  
to the character of a woman whose  
nature was as elusive as her  
influence was profound.  
She has caught the phantom."

—*The New York Times Book Review*

**"AN ELEGANT, ENTERTAINING  
NOVEL that brings new life to the  
Bloomsbury Group's intrigues."**

—*The Dallas Morning News*

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students went into either computer science or finance. One of them, Perry Tang, who had known Zhang in China, took a job at Intel. In 1999, he called Zhang. “I thought it was unfair for him not to have a professional job,” Tang said. He and Zhang had a classmate at Peking University who had become a professor of math at the University of New Hampshire, and when the friend said that he was looking for someone to teach calculus Tang recommended Zhang. “He decided to try him at a temporary position,” Tang said.

Zhang finished “Bounded Gaps Between Primes” in late 2012; then he spent a few months methodically checking each step, which he said was “very boring.” On April 17, 2013, without telling anyone, he sent the paper to *Annals of Mathematics*, widely regarded as the profession’s most prestigious journal. In the *Annals* archives are unpublished papers claiming to have solved practically every math problem that anyone has ever thought of, and others that don’t really exist. Some are from people who “know a lot of math, then they go insane,” a mathematician told me. Such people often claim that everyone else who has attacked the problem is wrong. Or they announce that they have solved several problems at once, or “they say they have solved a famous problem along with some unified-field theory in physics,” the mathematician said. Journals such as *Annals* are always skeptical of work from someone they have never heard of.

In 2013, *Annals* received nine hundred and fifteen papers and accepted thirty-seven. The wait between acceptance and publication is typically around a year. When a paper arrives, “it is read quickly, for worthiness,” Nicholas Katz, the Princeton professor who is the journal’s editor, told me, and then there is a deep reading that can take months. “The paper I can’t evaluate off the top of my head, my role is to know whom to ask,” Katz said. “In this case, the person wrote back pretty quickly to say, ‘If this is correct, it’s really fantastic. But you should be careful. This guy posted a paper once, and it was wrong. He never published

it, but he didn’t take it down, either.’” The reader meant a paper that Zhang posted on the Web site arxiv.org, where mathematicians often post results before submitting them to a journal, in order to have them seen quickly. Zhang posted a paper in 2007 that fell short of a proof. It concerned another famous problem, the Landau-Siegel zeros conjecture, and he left it up because he hopes to correct it.

Katz sent “Bounded Gaps Between Primes” to a pair of readers, who are called referees. One of them was Henryk Iwaniec, a professor at Rutgers, whose work was among that which Zhang had drawn on. “I glanced for a few minutes,” Iwaniec told me. “My first impression was: So many claims have become wrong. And I thought, I have other work to do. Maybe I’ll postpone it. Remember that he was an unknown guy. Then I got a phone call from a friend, and it happened he was also reading the paper. We were going to be together for a week at the Institute for Advanced Study, and the intention was to do other work, but we were interrupted with this paper to read.”

Iwaniec and his friend, John Friedlander, a professor at the University of Toronto, read with increasing attention. “In these cases, you don’t read A to Z,” Iwaniec said. “You look first at where is the idea. There had been nothing written on the subject since 2005. The problem was too difficult to solve. As we read more and more, the chance that the work was correct was becoming really great. Maybe two days later, we started looking for completeness, for connections. A few days passed, we’re checking line by line. The job is no longer to say the work is fine.

We are looking to see if the paper is truly correct.”

After a few weeks, Iwaniec and Friedlander wrote to Katz, “We have completed our study of the paper ‘Bounded Gaps Between Primes’ by Yitang Zhang.” They went on, “The main results are of the first rank. The author has succeeded to prove a landmark theorem in the distribution of prime numbers.” And, “Although we studied the arguments very thoroughly, we found it very difficult to

spot even the smallest slip. . . . We are very happy to strongly recommend acceptance of the paper for publication in the *Annals*.”

Once Zhang heard from *Annals*, he called his wife in San Jose. “I say, ‘Pay attention to the media and newspapers,’” he said. “‘You may see my name,’ and she said, ‘Are you drunk?’”

No formula predicts the occurrence of primes—they behave as if they appear randomly. Euclid proved, in 300 B.C., that there is an infinite number of primes. If you imagine a line of all the numbers there are, with ordinary numbers in green and prime numbers in red, there are many red numbers at the beginning of the line: 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 17, 19, 23, 29, 31, 37, 41, 43, and 47 are the primes below fifty. There are twenty-five primes between one and a hundred; 168 between one and a thousand; and 78,498 between one and a million. As the primes get larger, they grow scarcer and the distances between them, the gaps, grow wider.

Prime numbers have so many novel qualities, and are so enigmatic, that mathematicians have grown fetishistic about them. Twin primes are two apart. Cousin primes are four apart, sexy primes are six apart, and neighbor primes are adjacent at some greater remove. From “Prime Curios!,” by Chris Caldwell and G. L. Honaker, Jr., I know that an absolute prime is prime regardless of how its digits are arranged: 199; 919; 991. A beastly prime has 666 in the center. The number 700666007 is a beastly palindromic prime, since it reads the same forward and backward. A circular prime is prime through all its cycles or formulations: 1193, 1931, 9311, 3119. There are Cuban primes, Cullen primes, and curved-digit primes, which have only curved numerals—0, 6, 8, and 9. A prime from which you can remove numbers and still have a prime is a deletable prime, such as 1987. An emirp is prime even when you reverse it: 389, 983. Gigantic primes have more than ten thousand digits, and holey primes have only digits with holes (0, 4, 6, 8, and 9). There are Mersenne primes; minimal primes; naughty primes, which are made mostly from zeros (naughts); ordinary primes; Pierpont primes; plateau primes, which have the same interior numbers and





smaller numbers on the ends, such as 1777771; snowball primes, which are prime even if you haven't finished writing all the digits, like 73939133; Titanic primes; Wagstaff primes; Wall-Sun-Sun primes; Wolstenholme primes; Woodall primes; and Yarborough primes, which have neither a 0 nor a 1.

"Bounded Gaps Between Primes" is a back-door attack on the twin-prime conjecture, which was proposed in the nineteenth century and says that, no matter how far you travel on the number line, even as the gap widens between primes you will always encounter a pair of primes that are separated by two. The twin-prime conjecture is still unsolved. Euclid's proof established that there will always be primes, but it says nothing about how far apart any two might be. Zhang established that there is a distance within which, on an infinite number of occasions, there will always be two primes.

"You have to imagine this coming from nothing," Eric Grinberg said. "We simply didn't know. It is like thinking that the universe is infinite, unbounded, and finding it has an end somewhere." Picture it as a ruler that might be applied to the line of green and red numbers. Zhang chose a ruler of a length of seventy million, because a number that large made it easier to prove his conjecture. (If he had been able to prove the twin-prime conjecture, the number for the ruler would have been two.) This ruler can be moved along the line of numbers and enclose two primes an infinite number of times. Something that holds for infinitely many numbers does not necessarily hold for all. For example, an infinite number of numbers are even, but an infinite number of numbers are not even, because they are odd. Similarly, this ruler can also be moved along the line of numbers an infinite number of times and not enclose two primes.

From Zhang's result, a deduction can be made, which is that there is a number smaller than seventy million which precisely defines a gap separating an infinite number of pairs of primes. You deduce this, a mathematician told me, by means of the pigeonhole principle. You have an infinite number of pigeons, which are pairs of primes, and you have seventy million holes. There is a hole



*"I hear this place is a hotbed of international pancakes."*

• •

for primes separated by two, by three, and so on. Each pigeon goes in a hole. Eventually, one hole will have an infinite number of pigeons. It isn't possible to know which one. There may even be many, there may be seventy million, but at least one hole will have an infinite number of pigeons.

Having discovered that there is a gap, Zhang wasn't interested in finding the smallest number defining the gap. This was work that he regarded as a mere technical problem, a type of manual labor—"ambulance chasing" is what a prominent mathematician called it. Nevertheless, within a week of Zhang's announcement mathematicians around the world began competing to find the lowest number. One of the observers of their activity was Terence Tao, a professor at U.C.L.A. Tao had the idea for a cooperative project in which mathematicians would work to lower the number rather than "fighting to snatch the lead," he told me.

The project, called Polymath8, started in March of 2013 and continued for about a year. Incrementally, relying also on work by a young British mathematician named James Maynard, the participants reduced the bound to two hundred and forty-six. "There are several

problems with going lower," Tao said. "More and more computer power is required—someone had a high-powered computer running for two weeks to get that calculation. There were also theoretical problems. With current methods, we can never get better than six, because of something called the parity problem, which no one knows how to get past." The parity problem says that primes with certain behaviors can't be detected with current methods. "We never strongly believed we would get to two and prove the twin-prime conjecture, but it was a fun journey," Tao said.

**I**s there a talent a mathematician should have?"

"Concentration," Zhang said. We were walking across the campus in a light rain. "Also, you should never give up in your personality," he continued. "Maybe something in front of you is very complicated, it's lengthy, but you should be able to pick up the major points by your intuition."

When we reached Zhang's office, I asked how he had found the door into the problem. On a whiteboard, he wrote, "Goldston-Pintz-Yıldırım" and "Bombieri-Friedlander-Iwaniec." He said, "The first paper is on bound gaps, and the

second is on the distribution of primes in arithmetic progressions. I compare these two together, plus my own innovations, based on the years of reading in the library."

When I asked Peter Sarnak how Zhang had arrived at his result, he said, "What he did was look way out of reach. Maybe forty years ago the problem appeared hopeless, but in 2005 Goldston-Pintz-Yıldırım put it at the doorstep. Everybody thought, Now we're very close, but by 2011 no one was making any progress. Bombieri, Friedlander, and Iwaniec had the other important work, but it looked like you couldn't combine their ideas with Goldston. Their work was just not flexible enough to jive—it insisted on some side conditions. Then Zhang comes along. A lot of people use theorems like a computer. They think, If it is correct, then good, I'll use it. You couldn't use the Bombieri-Friedlander-Iwaniec, though, because it wasn't flexible enough. You have to take my word, because even to a serious mathematician this would be difficult to explain. Zhang understood the techniques deeply enough so as to be able to modify Bombieri-Friedlander-Iwaniec and cross this bridge. This is the most significant thing about what he has done mathematically. He's made the Bombieri-Friedlander-Iwaniec technique about the distribution of prime numbers a tool for any kind of study of primes. A development that began in the eighteen-hundreds continued through him."

"Our conditions needed to be relaxed," Iwaniec told me. "We tried, but we couldn't remove them. We didn't try long, because after failing you just start thinking there is some kind of natural barrier, so we gave up."

I asked if he was surprised by Zhang's result. "What Zhang did was sensational," he said. "His work is a masterpiece. When you talk of number theory, a lot of the beauty is the machinery. Zhang somehow completely understood the situation, even though he was working alone. That's how he surprised. He just amazingly pushed further some of the arguments in these papers."

Zhang used a very complicated form of a simple device for finding primes called a sieve, invented by a Greek named Eratosthenes, a contemporary of Ar-

chimedes. To use a simple sieve to find the primes less than a thousand, say, you write down all the numbers, then cross out the multiples of two, which can't be prime, since they are even. Then you cross out the multiples of three, then five, and so on. You have to go only as far as the multiples of thirty-one. Zhang used a different sieve from the one that others had used. The previous sieve excluded numbers once they grew too far apart. With it, Goldston, Pintz, and Yıldırım had proved that there were always two primes separated by something less than the average distance between primes that large. What they couldn't identify was a precise gap. Zhang succeeded partly by making the sieve less selective.

I asked Zhang if he was working on something new. "Maybe two or three problems I would like to solve," he said. "Bound gaps is successful, but still I have something else."

"Will it be as important?"

"Yes."

According to other mathematicians, Zhang is working on his incomplete result for the Landau-Siegel zeros conjecture. "If he succeeds, it would be much more dramatic," Peter Sarnak said. "We don't know how close he is, but he's proved that he's a genius. There's no question about that. He's also proved that he can speak with something over many years. Based on that, his chances are not zero. They're positive."

"Many people have tried that problem," Iwaniec said. "He's a private guy. Nothing is rushed. If it takes him another ten years, that's fine with him. Unless you tackle a problem that's already solved, which is boring, or one whose solution is clear from the beginning, mostly you are stuck. But Zhang is willing to be stuck much longer."

Zhang's preference for undertaking only ambitious problems is rare. The pursuit of tenure requires an academic to publish frequently, which often means refining one's work within a field, a task that Zhang has no inclination for. He does not appear to be competitive with other mathematicians, or resentful about having been simply a teacher for years while everyone else was a professor. No one who knows him thinks that he is suited to a tenure-track position. "I think

what he did was brilliant," Deane Yang told me. "If you become a good calculus teacher, a school can become very dependent on you. You're cheap and reliable, and there's no reason to fire you. After you've done that a couple of years, you can do it on autopilot; you have a lot of free time to think, so long as you're willing to live modestly. There are people who try to work nontenure jobs, of course, but usually they're nuts and have very dysfunctional personalities and lives, and are unpleasant to deal with, because they feel disrespected. Clearly, Zhang never felt that."

One day, I arrived at Zhang's office as he was making tea. There was a piece of paper on his desk with equations on it and a pen on top of the paper. Zhang had an envelope in one hand. "I had a letter from an old friend," he said. "We have been separated for many years, and now he found me."

He took a pair of scissors from a drawer and cut open the envelope so slowly that he seemed to be performing a ritual. The letter was written in Chinese characters. He sat on the edge of his chair and read slowly. He put the letter down and took from the envelope a photograph of a man and a woman and a child on a sofa with a curtain in the background. He returned to reading the letter and then he put it back in the envelope and in the drawer and closed the drawer. "His new address is in Queens," he said. Then he picked up his tea and blew on it and faced me, looking at me over the top of the cup like someone peering over a wall.

I asked about Hardy's observations regarding age—Hardy also wrote, "A mathematician may still be competent enough at sixty, but it is useless to expect him to have original ideas."

"This may not apply to me," Zhang said. He put his tea on the desk and looked out the window. "Still I think I have intuition," he said. "Still I am confident of myself. Still I have some other visions." ♦

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#### BLOCK THAT METAPHOR!

*From the DGA Quarterly.*

"The world of 7:30 on Tuesday nights, that's dead," Fincher said during an interview at his offices in Hollywood. "A stake has been driven through its heart, its head has been cut off, and its mouth has been stuffed with garlic."



## YOUR TAXES

BY PAUL RUDNICK

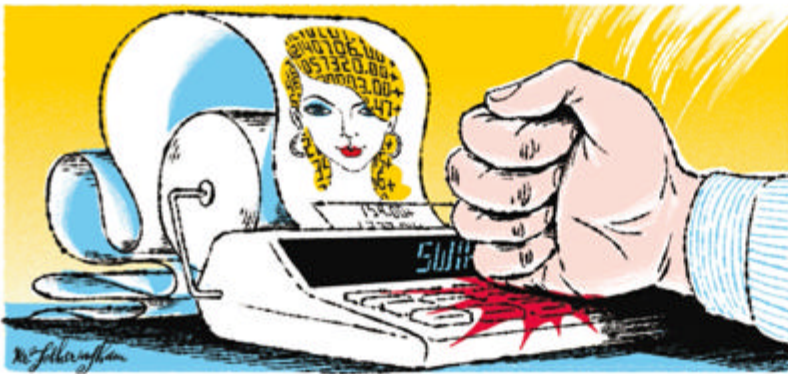
Please supply the following information and materials:

1. Your income from last year.
2. Taylor Swift's income from last year.
3. Instagram post of Taylor Swift laughing uproariously.
4. Your monthly mortgage payment.

when you kept asking, "Do you think Taylor has FiOS?"

11. Amount that Taylor Swift was paid to appear in ads for Subway promoting her latest album and telling fans that if they bought a thirty-ounce Limited Edition Diet Coke they could win a trip to meet her on tour.

12. Amount you spent on Metro-



5. Taylor Swift's monthly budget for lipstick and designer handbags, which is most likely zero, because she probably gets all of these things sent to her for free.

6. A list of all items that you've ever received for free, excluding cold sores, migraines, and lectures from your spouse regarding your tone.

7. Your combined bills for all utilities.

8. Rate increases for all utilities since last year.

9. Amount of time you spent complaining about these rate increases to the recorded messages at the utilities' 800 numbers informing you that all representatives are busy helping other customers, before being put on hold to listen to instrumental versions of Taylor Swift's hits from three years ago, which are still undeniably catchy.

10. Attorneys' fees for your upcoming divorce from the spouse who left you because you couldn't stop obsessing over your utility bills and Taylor Swift even while you were making love,

Cards to ride the subway while squeezed in between a drooling woman who fell asleep on your shoulder and a man who not only spread his legs wide enough to take up three seats but kept singing "Shake It Off," making obscene hand gestures at his crotch every time he got to the chorus.

13. A list of all dependents who have ever sincerely said "Thank you" or "I love you" or "You work so hard for us and all we do is whine about how embarrassing it is to get dropped off at school in a Camry while you ask questions like 'But how can any female pop star ever believe a word John Mayer says?'"

14. A list of all dependents who might someday marry Taylor Swift and finally move out of the house.

15. Payments for home repairs and upgrades made to a contractor who demanded fees up front and then DISAPPEARED OFF THE FACE OF THE EARTH.

16. Cost of Hyannis estate that Taylor Swift allegedly bought during her

brief fling with a Kennedy boy and then probably NEVER EVEN LIVED IN LET ALONE HAD TO DEAL WITH REPLACING THE ROOF.

17. Cost of meds that keep you calm enough to stop you from putting a pillow over the face of your elderly parent who keeps sighing and saying, "I wish I was Taylor Swift's mother."

18. Interest on student loans from the non-Ivy League school you attended twenty years ago and from which you received a useless degree in something involving the word "American."

19. Interest on Taylor Swift's student loans, which is ZERO, because she never even went to college and now she's a zillionaire and WHAT'S THE MORAL LESSON IN THAT?

20. Amount of alimony paid to ex-spouse, who claims that she can't work because of an emotional disability caused by your constant murmuring of the question "But can Taylor really be fulfilled by just her career and the support of her devoted female friends?"

21. Amount that Taylor Swift spent on developing a top-secret, state-of-the-art technology that she uses to send you mind-texts every five seconds regarding her net worth and her upcoming singles, along with inspirational messages about just being yourself.

22. Instagram post of you dressed as Taylor Swift at your child's middle-school graduation, featuring your bulging bare midriff, a cheerleader skirt, and a fake tattoo of Swift's next probable love interest—who's most likely that Internet kid who works at Target.

23. Facebook photo of you leaving a private rehab clinic after being declared "stable," and the subsequent post about you, the next day, telling the guy behind the counter at Subway, "Charge it to me, Taylor Swift, and then buy everyone in North Dakota a Big Hot Pastrami Melt, and tell them thanks for loving me."

24. Amount spent by Taylor Swift on legal team, restraining orders, and court costs.

25. Production fees for YouTube video of you telling Taylor Swift, "If you send me three hundred and fifty-one dollars to pay my taxes, I promise to stop telling people that you said if I really loved you I'd hack Sony." ♦

## A BUG IN THE SYSTEM

*Why last night's chicken made you sick.*

BY WIL S. HYLTON



Late one night in September of 2013, Rick Schiller awoke in bed with his right leg throbbing. Schiller, who is in his fifties, lives in San Jose, California. He had been feeling ill all week, and, as he reached under the covers, he found his leg hot to the touch. He struggled to sit upright, then turned on a light and pulled back the sheet. “My leg was about twice the normal size, maybe even three times,” he told me. “And it was hard as a rock, and bright purple.”

Schiller roused his fiancée, who helped him hobble to their car. He dropped into the passenger seat, but he couldn’t bend his leg to fit it through the door. “So I tell her, ‘Just grab it and shove it in,’” he re-

called. “I almost passed out in pain.”

At the hospital, five employees helped move Schiller from the car to a consulting room. When a doctor examined his leg, she warned him that it was so swollen there was a chance it might burst. She tried to remove fluid with a needle, but nothing came out. “So she goes in with a bigger needle—nothing comes out,” Schiller said. “Then she goes in with a huge needle, like the size of a pencil lead—nothing comes out.” When the doctor tugged on the plunger, the syringe filled with a chunky, meatlike substance. “And then she gasped,” Schiller said.

That night, he drifted in and out of consciousness in his hospital room. His

temperature rose to a hundred and three degrees and his right eye oozed fluid that crusted over his face. Schiller’s doctors found that he had contracted a form of the salmonella bacterium, known as *Salmonella* Heidelberg, which triggered a cascade of conditions, including an inflamed colon and an acute form of arthritis. The source of the infection was most likely something he had eaten, but Schiller had no idea what. He spent four days in intensive care before he could stand again and navigate the hallways. On the fifth day, he went home, but the right side of his body still felt weak, trembly, and sore, and he suffered from constant headaches. His doctors warned that he might never fully recover.

Three weeks later, Schiller received a phone call from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. An investigator wanted to know whether he had eaten chicken before he became sick. Schiller remembered that he’d bought two packages of raw Foster Farms chicken thighs just before the illness. He’d eaten a few pieces from one of the packages; the other package was still in his freezer. Several days later, an investigator from the U.S. Department of Agriculture stopped by to pick it up. She dropped the chicken into a portable cooler and handed him a slip of paper that said “Property Receipt.” That was the last time Schiller heard from the investigators. More than a year later, he still wasn’t sure what was in the chicken: “I don’t know what the Department of Agriculture found.”

Each year, contaminated food sickens forty-eight million Americans, of whom a hundred and twenty-eight thousand are hospitalized, and three thousand die. Many of the deadliest pathogens, such as *E. coli* and listeria, are comparatively rare; many of the most widespread, such as norovirus, are mercifully mild. Salmonella is both common and potentially lethal. It infects more than a million Americans each year, sending nineteen thousand victims to the hospital, and killing more people than any other food-borne pathogen. A recent U.S.D.A study found that twenty-four per cent of all cut-up chicken parts are contaminated by some form of salmonella. Another study, by *Consumer Reports*, found that more than a third of chicken breasts tainted with

*A lawyer is leading the fight to keep contaminated food off the supermarket shelf.*



salmonella carried a drug-resistant strain.

By the time Schiller became infected by salmonella, federal officials had been tracking an especially potent outbreak of the Heidelberg variety for three months—it had sent nearly forty per cent of its victims to the hospital. The outbreak began in March, but investigators discovered it in June, when a cluster of infections on the West Coast prompted a warning from officials at the C.D.C.'s PulseNet monitoring system, which tracks illnesses reported by doctors. Scientists quickly identified the source of the outbreak as Foster Farms facilities in California, where federal inspectors had discovered the same strain of pathogen during a routine test. Most of the victims of the outbreak confirmed that they'd recently eaten chicken, and many specifically named the Foster Farms brand. On August 9th, investigators joined a conference call with Foster Farms executives to inform them of the outbreak and its link to the company.

Identifying the cause of an outbreak is much simpler than trying to stop one. Once officials have traced the contamination to a food producer, the responsibility to curb the problem falls to the U.S.D.A.'s Food Safety and Inspection Service, or F.S.I.S. In the summer of 2013, as the outbreak spread, F.S.I.S. officials shared the C.D.C.'s conclusion that Foster Farms meat was behind the outbreak, but they had no power to force a recall of the tainted chicken. Federal law permits a certain level of salmonella contamination in raw meat. But when federal limits are breached, and officials believe that a recall is necessary, their only option is to ask the producer to remove the product voluntarily. Even then, officials may only request a recall when they have proof that the meat is already making customers sick. As evidence, the F.S.I.S. typically must find a genetic match between the salmonella in a victim's body and the salmonella in a package of meat that is still in the victim's possession, with its label still attached. If the patient has already eaten the meat, discarded the package, or removed the label, the link becomes difficult to make, and officials can't request a voluntary recall.

As the Heidelberg outbreak continued into the fall, F.S.I.S. investigators tracked down dozens of patients and asked them to search their homes for

contaminated chicken. In some cases, they discovered Foster Farms chicken that tested positive for salmonella—but they could not find a genetic match. David Goldman, who oversees public health at the F.S.I.S., told me, "We started about a hundred and forty trace-back efforts. And we failed in every case."

Meanwhile, Foster Farms was still producing chicken. By mid-September, on the week that Schiller checked into the hospital, at least fifty new patients had been infected—the most of any week since the outbreak began. On October 8th, the C.D.C. issued its first warning to the public: two hundred and seventy-eight patients had now been infected with Heidelberg in seventeen states, the agency reported, and Foster Farms chicken was the "likely source" of the outbreak. On November 15th, the C.D.C. raised the number to three hundred and eighty-nine victims in twenty-three states. By early July, 2014, there were six hundred and twenty-one cases. Scientists estimate that for each reported case twenty-eight go unreported, which meant that the Foster Farms outbreak had likely sickened as many as eighteen thousand people.

Finally, on July 3, 2014, more than a year after the outbreak began, officials at the F.S.I.S. announced a genetic match that would allow the agency to request a recall. Foster Farms executives agreed to withdraw the fresh chicken produced in its California facilities during a six-day period in March of that year. All other Foster Farms chicken would remain in distribution.

A few days later, I stopped by the office of Representative Rosa DeLauro, a Democrat from Connecticut and one of the most vocal advocates for food safety in Congress. After twenty-five years in the capital, DeLauro is not easily surprised, but when I mentioned the Foster Farms outbreak she slammed a fist on the table. "They're getting a tainted product out!" she said. "What in the hell is going on?"

Rick Schiller wondered the same thing. Last spring, as his leg healed and the headaches faded, he searched newspapers for signs of a recall. Then he started calling lawyers. Eventually, he found Bill Marler.

During the past twenty years, Marler has become the most prominent and

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powerful food-safety attorney in the country. He is fifty-seven years old, with neat gray hair and a compact physique; he tends to speak in a high, raspy voice, as though delighted by what he's about to say. His law firm, on the twenty-eighth floor of a Seattle office building, has filed hundreds of lawsuits against many of the largest food producers in the world. By his estimate, he has won more than six hundred million dollars in verdicts and settlements, of which his firm keeps about twenty per cent.

Given the struggles of his clients—victims of organ failure, sepsis, and paralysis—Marler says it can be tempting to dismiss him as a “bloodsucking ambulance chaser who exploits other people’s personal tragedies.” But many people who work in food safety believe that Marler is one of the few functioning pieces in a broken system. Food-borne illness, they point out, is pervasive but mostly preventable when simple precautions are taken in the production process. In Denmark, for instance, after a surge of salmonella cases in the nineteen-eighties, poultry workers were made to wash their hands and change clothing on entering the plant and to perform extensive microbiological testing. Sanctions—including recalls—are imposed as soon as a pathogen is found. As a result, salmonella contamination has fallen to less than two per cent. Similar results have been achieved in other European countries.

In the U.S., responsibility for food safety is divided among fifteen federal agencies. The most important, in addition to the F.S.I.S., is the Food and Drug Administration, in the Department of Health and Human Services. In theory, the line between these two should be simple: the F.S.I.S. inspects meat and poultry; the F.D.A. covers everything else. In practice, that line is hopelessly blurred. Fish are the province of the F.D.A.—except catfish, which falls under the F.S.I.S. Frozen cheese pizza is regulated by the F.D.A., but frozen pizza with slices of pepperoni is monitored by the F.S.I.S. Bagel dogs are F.D.A.; corn dogs, F.S.I.S. The skin of a link sausage is F.D.A., but the meat inside is F.S.I.S.

“The current structure is there not because it’s what serves the consumer best,” Elizabeth Hagen, a former head of the F.S.I.S., told me. “It’s there because it’s

the way the system has grown up.” Mike Taylor, the highest-ranking food-safety official at the F.D.A., said, “Everybody would agree that if you were starting on a blank piece of paper and designing the food-safety system for the future, from scratch, you wouldn’t design it the way it’s designed right now.”

Both the F.S.I.S. and the F.D.A. are also hampered by internal tensions. The regulatory function at the F.S.I.S. can seem like a distant afterthought at the U.S.D.A., whose primary purpose is to advance the interests of American agriculture. “We’re the red-headed stepchild of the U.S.D.A.,” one senior F.S.I.S. official told me. When regulation fails, private litigation can be the most powerful force for change. As Marler puts it, “If you want them to respond, you have to make them.” Robert Brackett, who directed food safety at the F.D.A. during the George W. Bush Administration, told me that Marler has almost single-handedly transformed the role that lawsuits play in food policy: “Where people typically thought of food safety as this three-legged stool—the consumer groups, the government, and the industry—Bill sort of came in as a fourth leg and actually was able to effect changes in a way that none of the others really had.” Hagen said the cost that Marler extracts from food makers “can be a stronger incentive or disincentive than the passing of any



particular regulation.” Mike Taylor called litigation such as Marler’s “a central element of accountability.”

**B**ill Marler lives with his wife and three daughters on Bainbridge Island, just west of Seattle. He commutes to work on a public ferry and spends the time walking in circles. He leaves his briefcase with friends in the cabin, climbs to the upper level, and steps outside, into the mist of Puget Sound. By the time the ferry reaches Seattle, forty minutes

later, Marler has usually logged about two and a half miles. A few years ago, realizing that most of his clients were too sick or too far away to visit him at work, he stopped wearing office attire, leaving on the wicking fabrics he wears on the ferry. It can be jarring for a first-time visitor to pass through the wood-paneled lobby of his firm, down a long hallway of offices filled with paralegals and junior attorneys, only to discover a small man in damp gym clothes reclining at Marler’s desk.

Marler rarely uses the fiery rhetoric one might expect from a lifelong litigator. His preference is the soft sell, the politician’s lure—cajoling insurance adjusters, health officials, microbiologists, and opposing counsel. He developed his coaxing manner early on. In 1977, as a sophomore at Washington State University, in the small town of Pullman, he ran for the city council on a whim, and won by fifty-three votes. During the next four years, he sponsored a fair-housing bill, tightened snow-removal laws, established a bus service for drunk drivers (critics called it Bill’s Booze Bus), and helped to manage the seven-member council’s six-million-dollar budget.

“All these skills that I use every day—how to deal with the media, how to deal with complex interpersonal relationships to try to get a deal done—I learned between the ages of nineteen and twenty-two, when everybody else was smoking dope,” he told me. Jeff Miller, an attorney in New York, recalled the first time he faced Marler in federal court, on a day that Miller had to leave early for a charity event. The judge was notoriously thorny and Miller was terrified to request an early dismissal, which seemed like an invitation for Marler to object and score points. Miller told me, “And as I was in court, telling the judge that I needed to get out of there, Bill just cut a significant check and said, ‘Bring this with you.’”

Marler became involved in food safety in 1993, as a thirty-five-year-old lawyer at a big Seattle firm, when a client called with a food-poisoning referral. An outbreak of *E. coli*, seemingly caused by contaminated burgers from Jack in the Box, was spreading through the state. Marler’s client had a friend whose daughter had become ill, and Marler took her case. During the next several months, the outbreak sickened more than five



## TELL US A STORY, GRANDMA

I wonder which ones I will remember:  
That I loved my boyfriend's best friend?  
That I rode the lonely train to Boston?  
That I could never hold myself together?  
Maybe I should just tell them  
Milk was \$2.89 a gallon and bread was \$3.29  
And an iPhone was \$200  
In 2010, when I was 22.

—Natalie Wise

hundred Jack in the Box customers. Four children died. Marler plunged into microbiological research on *E. coli*. After reading scientific papers and talking to experts, he discovered that the bacterium, which typically lives in the intestines of cattle, can enter the food supply in meat or when vegetables are contaminated by fecal matter. The outbreak had been caused by a variant of the bug known as O157:H7, which secretes a powerful toxin in a victim's body. In some cases, the toxin can induce a reaction called hemolytic-uremic syndrome, in which the individual's face and hands swell, bruises cover the body, and blood begins to trickle from the nose. One in twenty patients dies. The only way to kill the bacteria in food is to cook it thoroughly.

Attorneys for Jack in the Box responded to Marler's lawsuit by sending him more than fifty cardboard boxes of discovery material. Marler moved the boxes to his firm's conference room and spent nights and weekends sifting through every page. He found letters sent by the Washington State Department of Health to Jack in the Box, announcing a new, mandatory cooking temperature for ground beef. He discovered that the chain had not followed the new standards, undercooking its meat, and he studied suggestion forms submitted by employees to corporate headquarters indicating that Jack in the Box executives knew they were cutting corners.

Marler spent the next two years immersed in discovery and settlement negotiations. He turned down multimillion-dollar offers, and demanded a hundred million dollars, an unprecedented sum at the time. He courted food and health reporters at major news organizations and

publicly accused the company's executives of killing children. To defuse the tension, he would meet the Jack in the Box attorneys at a hotel bar and buy them drinks. (Hours later, he might call a reporter to pass along gossip he had gleaned.) As the outbreak became national news, more than a hundred victims came forward to be represented by Marler. The settlement, of more than fifty million dollars, included \$15.6 million for a ten-year-old girl named Brianne Kiner, who spent forty days in a coma. It was the largest individual food-poisoning claim in American history.

Prompted by public outrage, federal officials took a dramatic step. On September 29, 1994, at a convention of the American Meat Institute, Mike Taylor, at that time the administrator of the F.S.I.S., announced that his agency would adopt a zero-tolerance policy toward *E. coli* in ground beef. There would be no acceptable level of contamination; anytime the agency detected the bacterium, it would remove the product from distribution. To do so, Taylor would classify the outbreak strain of *E. coli* as an "adulterant," which in meat and poultry is normally reserved for toxic industrial chemicals. It was the first time that the agency had applied the designation to a food-borne microbe. Although a consortium of meat producers and retailers sued the U.S.D.A. that December, a federal court affirmed the change. Five years later, officials expanded the rule to banish the same strain of *E. coli* in other beef products. In 2011, they declared six additional strains of *E. coli* to be adulterants. The lesson, Taylor told me, is that "having accountability for prevention in the government regulatory system works." Yet, twenty years

after Taylor's landmark *E. coli* decision, officials at the F.S.I.S. have failed to declare any other food-borne pathogen to be an adulterant in raw meat.

People who work with Marler are accustomed to e-mails landing in the night, with links and attachments and an abundance of exclamation points. At least twice a month, he flies across the country to speak with advocacy groups and at food-industry events. He will not accept payment from any food company, and has turned down thousands of dollars to deliver a short lecture, only to pay his own way to the venue and present the speech for free. Sometimes, when Marler takes the stage, members of the audience walk out. At a meeting of the Produce Manufacturers Association, in the summer of 2013, he approached the lectern as loudspeakers blared the Rolling Stones song "Sympathy for the Devil."

Marler rarely has trouble getting companies to concede when their product has caused illness, but occasionally one of his cases involves more complicated legal questions. In 2011, thirty-three people died of listeriosis after eating cantaloupe produced in Colorado by Jensen Farms. *Listeria* is a rare but deadly bacterium. It infects about sixteen hundred U.S. residents per year, and kills one in five victims. The disease can take up to seventy days to manifest symptoms, and, when it does, the initial signs—a sudden onset of chills, fever, diarrhea, headache, or vomiting—can resemble those of the flu. Since the nineteen-eighties, it has caused three of the deadliest food-borne outbreaks on record.

Because listeria can grow in cold temperatures, it is perfectly suited to the era of prepared foods. "One of the reasons that we still have a lot of food-borne illness is because we've created these environments of convenience," Marler told me one morning, as we barreled down the highway in his pickup, a 1951 Chevy with the license plate "ECOLI." The truck rattled and reeked of gasoline; his golden retriever, Rowan, slept in the truck bed. "Bagged salad, refrigerators with secret drawers that are supposed to keep things fresh for longer," Marler said, shaking his head. "We get so wrapped up with production and convenience, and nobody pays any attention to bacteriology."

Indeed, at the Jensen Farms plant,

where the contaminated cantaloupes originated, a mechanized system had been washing the melons with tap water, rather than the antimicrobial solution recommended by the F.D.A. The C.D.C. counts a hundred and forty-seven victims in the cantaloupe case. Sixty-six have filed suit, and forty-six of them have hired Marler. He is using a novel legal argument that could set a precedent in food law.

Unlike the F.S.I.S., the F.D.A. does not have a large army of inspectors for the products under its purview. Years can elapse between official inspections at a given food producer. In place of federal inspections, most reviews are conducted by private companies known as auditors. These audits are demanded by retailers who want to be sure they are buying clean food. In the case of the 2011 listeria outbreak, auditors had actually been inside the plant just a few days before the first contaminated cantaloupes were shipped. Subcontractors working for the company PrimusLabs noted the absence of antimicrobial wash but gave the facility a rating of "superior" and a score of ninety-six per cent.

Marler has filed suit against Jensen Farms and retailers like Walmart and Kroger, but he is also suing PrimusLabs on behalf of listeria victims. There is no clear legal basis for doing so. Because PrimusLabs is a private company, hired by another private company for a private purpose, its lawyers contend that its only legal duty is to the producer that commissioned its audit—not to the consumers who bought a cantaloupe several steps down the supply chain. Attorneys for PrimusLabs have tried repeatedly to have Marler's lawsuit dismissed. In most jurisdictions, they have failed.

Marler says that the PrimusLabs attorneys have made a strategic blun-

der. An early settlement would have kept the outbreak relatively quiet, he told me, but each time the court rejects a motion by Primus to dismiss the case a precedent is set. "There was an empty desert between us, and I wasn't even sure they were there," he said. "Then they started leaving bread crumbs. They're creating a road map for how to try a case against them."

Privately, officials at the F.S.I.S. say that they would like to take a more aggressive stand on salmonella. But an agency ruling like the one twenty years ago on *E. coli* would almost certainly fail in court today. In the past forty years, federal judges have severely limited the agency's power. That history began, by most accounts, with a 1974 lawsuit in which the American Public Health Association sued the U.S.D.A. to demand that it print bacterial warnings on raw meat. An appellate court ruled that the warnings were unnecessary, because customers already knew that meat carries bacteria. "American housewives and cooks normally are not ignorant or stupid," the judge wrote.

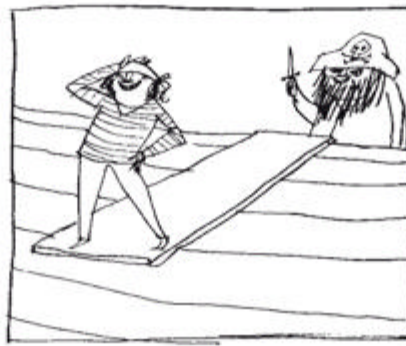
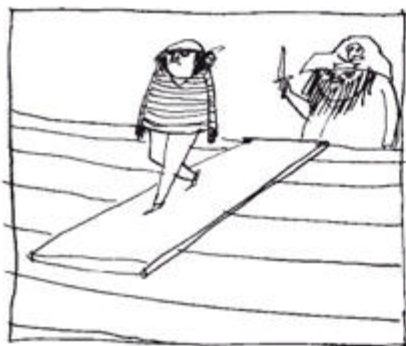
When another court ruled in favor of the F.S.I.S. decision to declare *E. coli* an adulterant, the ruling included a passage to prevent the F.S.I.S. from applying the same label to other bacteria: "Courts have held that other pathogens, such as salmonella, are not adulterants." In response to that decision, in 1996 the F.S.I.S. enacted a series of new rules to curb pathogens like salmonella. For whole chickens, the salmonella "performance standard" was set at twenty per cent, meaning that one in every five bird carcasses could be contaminated. That standard has since been lowered to 7.5 per cent, but the performance standard for salmonella in ground chicken is much

higher—44.6 per cent—and for ground turkey it is 49.9 per cent. "Which means that almost half of all your ground chicken that goes off the line can actually test positive for salmonella," Urvashi Rangan, the director of food safety at *Consumer Reports*, told me.

Some products, such as cut-up chicken parts, have no performance standard at all. A hundred per cent of the product in supermarkets may be contaminated without running afoul of federal limits. Rangan told me that she was stunned when she discovered this, just recently: "We've asked the U.S.D.A. point blank, 'So does that mean there aren't standards for lamb chops and pork ribs?' And they said, 'Yeah, we don't have standards for those.'"

When I asked David Goldman, of the F.S.I.S.'s public-health program, why a common product like chicken parts has no contamination limit, he said, "We're in the process of doing just that." Last week, the agency announced plans to establish its first performance standard for chicken parts, limiting salmonella contamination to 15.4 per cent of packages. I asked Phil Derfler, the deputy administrator, why it had taken the agency twenty years. "It's not like there is anybody else in the world who is pursuing what we're doing, and so it is a bit of trial and error," he said. "If there was a font of wisdom that said, 'You should be doing this,' maybe we would be doing it." I mentioned Denmark's success in combatting salmonella, and Derfler said, "I mean, it would be a major kind of almost top-to-bottom kind of thing. And I don't know what the costs would be in economics."

Even when the agency sets a pathogen limit and a producer exceeds it, officials have few options. Under the terms of a 1999 lawsuit, inspectors may not





shut down a facility because of a failure to meet contamination limits. Instead, officials must use indirect measures to put pressure on the company, such as posting news of the violation on the F.S.I.S. Web site, which could embarrass company executives. Derfler told me that the agency's work-arounds have been effective. "We have tried to do it," he said.

In December of 2013, officials at the F.S.I.S. unveiled a new "Salmonella Action Plan." At the heart of the plan was a "poultry-slaughter rule," which would reduce the number of federal inspectors observing the production line at slaughterhouses. Derfler told me that this will allow the agency to place "a greater emphasis on microbiology" and added that the rule also requires plants to do their own testing. Critics of the plan wonder how it is possible to improve food safety by removing inspectors. On March 13th of last year, Representative Louise Slaughter, who is the only member of Congress with a degree in microbiology, and ten other members of the House, including Rosa DeLauro, wrote a letter to the F.S.I.S., calling certain aspects of the new plan "pernicious" and asking that it be suspended. Nevertheless, the fiscal budget for 2015 assumes that it will go into effect, and cuts the funding for several hundred federal meat inspectors.

Marler opposes the new poultry rule, but he says that the real issue is the inspectors' inability to close a plant when they detect high levels of food-borne pathogens. "If you're allowing the product to become contaminated, having more or less inspectors is beside the point," he said. In 2011, the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a nonprofit advocacy group, submitted a petition to the F.S.I.S. arguing that the four most vicious types of salmonella should be declared adulterants, like *E. coli*. The agency issued no response and, in May of last year, Marler consulted with the center on a lawsuit demanding a reply to the petition. On July 31st, officials formally rejected the proposal, claiming that "more data are needed."

Marler scoffed at the claim. "One part of the meat industry is just ignoring twenty years of progress on the other side," he said. "They're using the same words, the same press releases, the same

language that they used twenty years ago, when they were saying, 'Oh, my God, the sky will fall if you label *E. coli* O157 as an adulterant.'"

When Marler's litigation becomes complicated and protracted, his firm can go months without generating income. Marler routinely lends money to the firm to keep the operation afloat. One morning, his longtime office manager, Peggy Paulson, stepped into his office with a sheepish look. When Marler glanced up, Paulson said quietly, "I could use a check for half a million bucks." Marler's jaw dropped with feigned horror. "So could I!" he said with a laugh. Then he promised to write a check. Later, he told me, "That's partly why I don't buy a vacation home. I've never been in a position that I settled a case because I needed the money."

During the past five years, Marler has begun to move from litigation to activism. In 2009, frustrated by the short attention span of the mass media, he founded an online newsletter, Food Safety News, which employs four full-time reporters and costs Marler a quarter of a million dollars a year to underwrite. On July 25, 2014, the editor of the site, Dan Flynn, and two of its employees received subpoenas in a defamation lawsuit against ABC News by the meat producer Beef Products, Inc. The lawsuit also names two former employees of the F.S.I.S., who spoke critically about the company in the ABC segment. Marler is defending those employees pro bono; two weeks ago, he received a subpoena in the case himself. Late at night, Marler also scribbles entries for the MarlerBlog, his personal Web site, where he has posted more than five thousand commentaries on food safety in recent years.

Sometimes, when Marler encounters critics who charge him with having predatory motives, he challenges them to "put me out of business." David Acheson, a former Associate Commissioner for Foods at the F.D.A., told me, "That's just become a bit of a trademark. He doesn't want that." Still, Acheson told me that he has seen an evolution in Marler. "In the early days, Bill was just on a mission to sue large food companies—he was on

a mission to make money," Acheson said. "But I think during the course of that he realized that there are problems with the food-safety system, and I think progressively, philosophically, he changed from just being a plaintiff attorney to being somebody who believes that changing food safety for the betterment of public health is a laudable goal." Acheson added, with no small measure of distaste, "He still sues food companies."

In April, 2014, Marler filed a suit against Foster Farms on behalf of Rick Schiller. On July 31st, the C.D.C. announced that the outbreak "appears to be over." Foster Farms has implemented new controls to reduce salmonella, but Marler hopes that a successful lawsuit will pressure

other producers to take similar precautions. Meanwhile, last summer, an eight-year-old boy in Braintree, Massachusetts, died of complications from *E. coli* after eating ground beef from a Whole Foods market. Six weeks later, an epidemiologist with the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, in an e-mail to the boy's mother, accused Whole Foods executives of "grasping at straws and dragging their feet in an attempt to avoid doing a recall." On August 15th, the F.S.I.S. announced that its testing had "determined that there is a link between ground beef purchased at Whole Foods Market and this illness cluster." The company agreed to issue a recall of three hundred and sixty-eight pounds of ground beef, but it continues to assert that "our thorough and ongoing investigation of the circumstances has not shown any clear link to our business." On December 17th, Marler filed suit against Whole Foods on behalf of the boy's parents.

"Fifteen years ago, almost all the cases I had were *E. coli* linked to hamburger, and now I have maybe two or three," he told me over the phone in mid-January. He was sitting in his office overlooking the Seattle harbor. "It shows how much progress we've made. You might hate lawyers, you might not want us to make money, but look what the beef industry did." Marler said he had recently eaten a hamburger for the first time in twenty years. "Ground beef has learned its lesson—but chicken is still, in many respects, unregulated. So we have to keep fighting." ♦



# YOUR SON IS DECEASED

*The city has one of the highest rates in the country of fatal shootings by police, but no officer has been indicted.*

BY RACHEL AVIV

Stephen Torres was meeting with a client at his law office, in downtown Albuquerque, on April 12, 2011, when he received a call from a neighbor, who told him that police officers were aiming rifles at his house. He left work and drove to his home, in a middle-class suburb with a view of the mountains. There were more than forty police vehicles on his street. Officers wearing camouflage fatigues and bulletproof vests had circled his home, a sand-colored two-story house with a pitched tile roof. Two officers were driving a remote-controlled robot, used for discharging bombs, back and forth on the corner.

Stephen's wife, Renetta, the director of human resources for the county, arrived a few minutes later, just after three o'clock. A colleague had heard her address repeated on the police radio, so her assistant pulled her out of a meeting. When Renetta saw that the street was cordoned off with police tape, she tried to walk to her house, but an officer told her that she couldn't enter the "kill zone." "What do you mean 'kill zone'?" Renetta asked. "Ma'am, you can't go any further," the officer said.

Renetta and Stephen found each other at the southern end of the street. There were nearly eighty officers and city officials on the street, many of whom they recognized. Stephen saw a police-union attorney, who defended officers when they were in trouble. Renetta saw the city's attorney, who worked in the same building and on the same floor as she did, and the deputy chief of police, whom she'd known in graduate school. "I kept looking her way, but she would not make eye contact with me," Renetta said.

Renetta knew that the only person at home was the youngest of her three boys, Christopher, who was twenty-seven and had schizophrenia. Two

hours earlier, he had stopped by her office for lunch, as he did a few times a week. Then he visited an elderly couple who lived two houses away. He said that he needed to "check up on them"; he often cleaned their pool or drove them to the grocery store. Because he found it overwhelming to spend too much time among people, he tried to do small, social errands, so as not to isolate himself.

When Stephen asked the police what had happened to Christopher, he was told only that there was an "ongoing criminal investigation." Stephen offered to let the officers inside the house, but they refused. Stephen called a close friend on the force, who said that a person had been taken off in an ambulance earlier in the afternoon, at around two o'clock. Stephen called the three main hospitals in Albuquerque, but Christopher hadn't been admitted to any of them.

Stephen called a neighbor, Val Aubol, who lived across the street, to find out what she could see. Aubol peeked through the shutters of her front window and saw ten officers lined up against a neighbor's garage, next to the Torreses' house. The SWAT team's Ballistic Engineered Armored Response Counter Attack Truck was parked in front of them. When Aubol went into her back yard, she saw a rope dangling from her roof. An officer had climbed up and was pointing his gun at the Torreses' house. Another officer was crouching behind the gate at the side of her house. She told the officers that she'd spoken with Christopher's father, but an officer waved her back inside. "Stay in the house!" he shouted.

At around five-thirty, a female officer stepped out of a mobile crime unit, an R.V. where detectives processed evidence, and waved the family over. "She was so detached," Renetta said. "All she

said was 'I regret to inform you that your son is deceased.'" She did not tell them how their son had died or where they could find his body. The Torreses asked if they could go home, but the officer said that it was still an active crime scene.

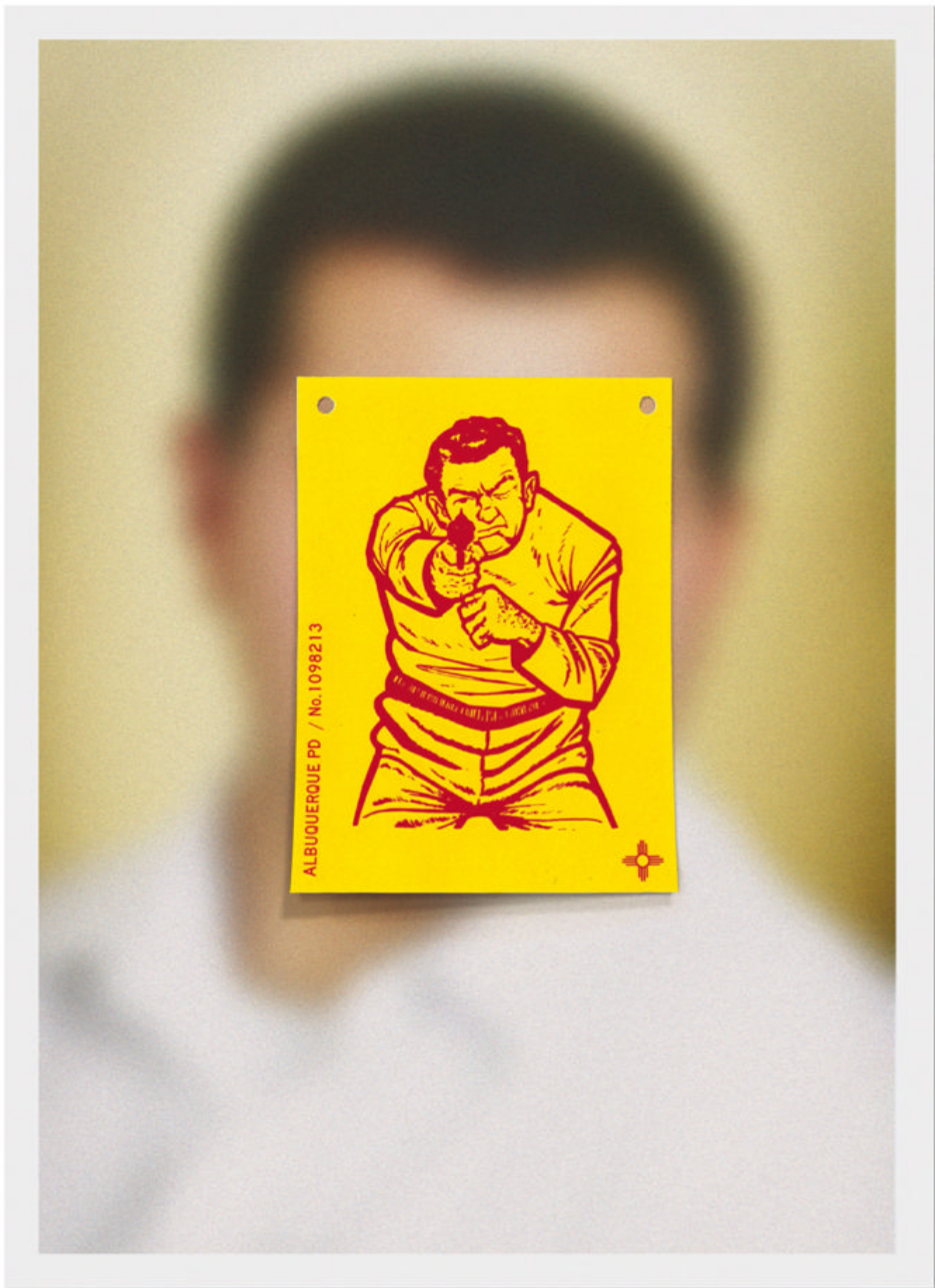
About half an hour later, Val Aubol heard a booming noise, and her ceiling shook. The officer on her roof had shot a flash-bang grenade, which produces a concussive blast of noise and light, onto the Torreses' front patio. The device temporarily blinds and deafens anyone near it.

It is not clear what the officers thought they were doing at that point. In a report filed later that day, one officer wrote, "Detectives believed another person was inside the house refusing to exit. Supposedly they saw movement in the house." Another wrote, "There may be three people still inside the residence and all were possibly armed."

Not long afterward, several officers used a battering ram to open the Torreses' front door, which had on it a "Welcome" sign decorated with an Easter bunny. The officers searched the laundry room, the basement, the attic, and four bedrooms, dumping the contents of drawers onto the floor. No one was home.

Although there were no suspects to apprehend, the neighborhood was still filled with cops, who had heard on the police radio that an officer had shot someone. According to Thomas Grover, a sergeant with the Albuquerque Police Department, who resigned a few months after Christopher's death, shootings by officers set off a ritual in the department: other officers quickly reported to the scene. "It was just team spirit, I guess," he said. "Everyone would say, 'Oh, there's a shooting, we got to get there, everyone's going down there.' It was a place to be seen." He said that





*After nearly every death, the police announced that the person the officer had shot was violent, a career criminal, or mentally ill.*



*"You should only be worried if you never had it as a kid."*

in the hours after a shooting cops would ask one another, "Was it a bad shoot? Or a good shoot?"

The Torres family learned how Christopher died from watching the news the next day. At a press conference, the department's chief public-safety officer said that two officers had tried to arrest Christopher at home, but, when he resisted and grabbed a gun from one of them, the officers felt that their lives were in danger. The local television stations ran an unflattering picture of Christopher with his eyes bugged out. One station reported that the "police suspected Torres is responsible for several violent road rage incidents around the city." The police department said publicly that Christopher had a lengthy criminal history, which was untrue. He'd never been convicted of a crime, though he had been arrested once, for public affray, disorderly conduct, and impersonating an officer: he'd fought with a man who had illegally carried his gun into a restaurant where Christopher was eating. Christopher told the man that he was a government agent, tackled him, and took the weapon. When asked to show his credentials, Christopher flashed his library card.

In the five years before Christopher's death, the Albuquerque Police Department shot thirty-eight people, killing

nineteen of them. More than half were mentally ill. In Albuquerque, a city of five hundred and fifty thousand, the rate of fatal shootings by police is eight times that of New York City. Renetta vaguely remembered hearing about many of the deaths in the local media. Nearly every time, the police announced that the person who had been shot was violent, a career criminal, or mentally ill. "I just assumed that these men must have done something to merit being killed," she said. "On the news, they relayed these really sinister stories about the men, and they'd flash these horrible pictures. They looked frightening."

Grover, the former sergeant, said that when officers shot someone the department typically ordered a "red file" on the deceased. "The special-investigations division did a complete background on the person and came up with any intelligence to identify that, you know, twenty years ago, maybe, the person got tagged for shoplifting," he said. "Then they gave the red file to the chief."

More than a thousand people attended Christopher's funeral, at the Catholic church where he prayed with his parents every week. Stephen, in his eulogy, said that he considered the chief of police, Raymond Schultz, his friend. The Torreses' sons used to play soccer at the same neighborhood club as Schultz's children; after the kids' games,

the fathers would play. "I called Ray's office and conveyed a personal invitation for him to join us this evening," Stephen said. "I promised him that he would be treated with all due courtesy and respect. If he's not here, then I ask those police officers who are here, who are some of my dearest friends . . . please convey the following message to him."

Stephen said that his son's shooting resembled that of many young men in Albuquerque who were mentally ill and had been killed by police. He begged the chief and the mayor, who worked in Renetta's building, to meet with him to discuss what had gone wrong. "My wife and I extend our hands to you, Mr. Mayor, and to you, Chief Schultz," he said. "Please don't reject our offers." Schultz was not there. He and Stephen never spoke again.

Christopher had been an easygoing, athletic child, but when he was nineteen he grew more private and sensitive. He was reluctant to leave the house and, eventually, to emerge from his room. He often seemed distracted, as if he were listening to something. A voice kept saying to him, "Well, Chris, I'm here, so let's get moving." He wondered if Jesus was talking to him, but he also doubted it. "He felt like maybe he was coming under a depression," Renetta told me. "He had a great sense of humor that seemed to have been dulled."

After Christopher received a diagnosis of schizophrenia, in the winter of 2003, his older brother Daniel, who was twenty-four and worked at an auto shop, quit his job and moved home to take care of him. For two years, he tried to make Christopher's days placid and predictable. Like many people with schizophrenia, Christopher had a low tolerance for abrupt movements or loud noises. When the family watched television or listened to music, they kept the volume low. If they argued, they did so quietly.

It took Christopher two years to adjust to the antipsychotic medications that were prescribed for him. Eventually, the voices he heard became less compelling, and he began working at a metal-fabrication shop. His boss, George Montez, described him as shy, focussed, and deferential. He said that



the only time he saw Christopher agitated was when colleagues bickered. "It was just horsing around, but it upset him," Montez said.

According to the treatment notes of Christopher's psychiatrist, Kevin Rexroad, Christopher was amiable and not inclined toward drama. When Rexroad asked how he was feeling, he responded, "I'm O.K. How are you?" Christopher's most persistent symptom was anxiety, which Rexroad traced in part to grief over the onset of his illness. Christopher felt that he was falling short of his own expectations. A therapist who briefly helped him with anxiety wrote that his goals were to "feel good about self," be "proud of where I'm going," and "read a little more."

Occasionally, when Christopher was under stress, he imagined that he had a wife and children, somewhere in the city, whom he'd abandoned. Renetta reacted calmly and offered to look for them. "We'd get in the car and search for his family," she said. "Once we'd driven a while, Christopher, by the grace of God, would let go of the idea and feel O.K. and be ready to go home."

After Christopher had worked at the metal-fabrication shop for a few years, Stephen urged him to take classes at a community college. But the idea of being surrounded by peers who might think that he was odd caused him so much anxiety that he couldn't sleep. In August, 2010, Renetta e-mailed Rexroad to say that Christopher had been perceiving invisible dangers: when Stephen told him to do a household chore, Christopher reacted as if he'd been threatened. "Given a little bit of time and space he then comes back around," she wrote. "As you know sometimes we walk a very fragile line and strive not to cause any undue agitation."

A few months later, in February, 2011, when Christopher was driving, another vehicle pulled in front of him into the left-turn lane. At the red light, Christopher got out and walked to the car in front of him, pounded on the windows, and pulled the driver's door open. The woman driving the car said that it seemed as if he had mistaken her for someone else. She shut her eyes and prepared to be attacked. When she opened her eyes, Christopher had

turned around and clutched his hair, as if he realized what he'd been doing. The woman called 911 and reported the incident to the police. She described Christopher as "psycho" and told the police that if she'd had a gun in her car she would have shot him.

About two months later, C.J. Brown, a thirty-nine-year-old detective, interviewed the driver and then filled out a warrant for Christopher's arrest. Brown didn't know that Christopher had a mental illness, even though police records showed that he had stated, during his first arrest, that he had schizophrenia. Brown said, "So basically just—you know, at that point, I had a guy that just had a bad attitude while driving."

Brown, who is five feet ten, weighs two hundred and twenty pounds, and has short, receding brown hair, had been an officer with the department for four years, since 2007. At the time, the department had been ordered by Mayor Martin Chávez to expand by at least a hundred officers, to bring the total number up to more than a thousand. Chávez had promised to reduce crime and quality-of-life infractions, and he developed a program that allowed officers to use nuisance-abatement laws to evict people from businesses and from homes.

The crime rate had been declining for nearly a decade, but the city still ranked in the top fifteen per cent in the country. To recruit new officers, the department advertised on billboards throughout the East Coast and the Midwest. In 2007, the department installed a twenty-five-foot billboard on a wall in downtown Manhattan: it featured a panorama of the Albuquerque skyline and promised a five-thousand-dollar hiring bonus, retirement after twenty years, a "take home car and more."

Nevertheless, the department struggled to find qualified officers. "We took a beating from the city council," Schultz, the chief of police, told me. "They berated us. They kept saying, 'We've given you the money—how come you don't have those numbers?'"

The department accepted officers from other police forces, even if they had been disciplined or fired, and it sometimes waived the psychological exam. Steve Tate, the director of training at the Albuquerque Police Academy, said that, after the hiring push, he noticed new cadets "exhibiting some characteristics that I thought were a little strange." "They were not in charge of their emotions," he told me. "People were breaking down into tears." He spoke with the head of the department's psychological unit, and asked



*"He's made way too much money for one day."*

why so many officers seemed psychologically unstable. “I could pick up a sense of worry from her,” he said. “She described to me feeling as though they were strong-armed into seating people that they didn’t feel were ready.” Peter DiVasto, a contract psychologist for the department, said in a deposition that psychologists felt that they were supposed to “err on the side of acceptance.” He testified that “deputy chiefs had been threatened with firing unless those numbers went up.”

At meetings with the police chief and his deputies, Tate said he pleaded to reject applicants who seemed erratic. He said that a “common phrase was ‘Well, we got seats open, so let’s give them a try.’” The department began accepting candidates whose “backgrounds were so bad it was just, like, wow,” he said. There were cadets who had admitted to crimes and had been repeatedly disciplined in previous jobs. Of the sixty-three officers who joined the Albuquerque police force in 2007, ten eventually shot people.

Brown had already been rejected by the Albuquerque Police Department, in 1995, because he had bad credit, which was seen as a sign of recklessness. He ended up in the Roswell Police Department, three hours south of Albuquerque. While he was there, a city councillor brought a civil-rights lawsuit against him—she alleged that he had arrested her for exercising her right to free speech—and five citizens filed complaints. He was accused of injuring a man by throwing him to the ground; of humiliating a mother when arresting her for speeding; and of pointing his gun at someone who got out of his car too slowly. Later, he estimated that he had drawn his gun during a traffic stop on at least ten occasions. In 2005, he applied to work for the police department in Rio Rancho, just north of Albuquerque, but he was rejected for having a bad attitude.

Since the last time he applied to the Albuquerque Police Department, Brown had been in two car accidents and filed for bankruptcy—events that the department typically considered indications of instability—but his sec-

ond application was accepted, and he was given a signing bonus of five thousand dollars. He didn’t take a psychological exam. His training lasted six weeks.

The day that Christopher was killed, Brown arrived at the Torreses’ house wearing bluejeans, black sunglasses, and a shirt that said “Buell Motorcycles.” He said that he found it easier to approach people when he wasn’t wearing a uniform. He was joined by another officer, Richard Hilger, who wore jeans, an untucked T-shirt, and hiking boots. They rang the doorbell, but no one answered. They could see the living room through the slats of the window blinds; no one appeared to be home. They were about to return to their car when Hilger heard a noise in the back yard. According to statements made later by both officers, they walked toward the fence and Hilger called out Christopher’s name.

“Yeah,” Christopher said, approaching the fence from the other side. He wore plaid pajama pants, a white undershirt, and flip-flops.

“I just want to talk to you real quick,” Hilger said.

“You’re talking to me,” Christopher responded.

“Well, can I talk to you face to face?”

“We’re face to face right now.”

“You have a felony arrest warrant,” Brown said.

“No, I don’t.”

“Yes, you do. You have a felony warrant for your arrest.”

“I haven’t done anything wrong,” Christopher said.

“This is my back yard.”

According to Brown, Christopher said that the officers would have to fight if they wanted to arrest him. When Christopher took a step backward, Brown jumped the four-foot fence, breaking part of it, and tackled Christopher. “He went to hit me, I punched him, and then the fight was on,” Brown said. Hilger followed his partner into the back yard by removing a panel of the fence. “I basically bum-rushed them all,” he said.

A twenty-four-year-old neighbor, Christie Apodaca, who lived behind the Torreses, heard someone shouting,

“I live here. What are you doing? I live here.” She ran to her fence and looked through a coin-size hole in one of the wooden panels. Christopher had gone to her high school, but she’d only spoken to him once or twice. She saw him on his hands and knees, about twelve feet away from her. One man pressed his weight onto Christopher’s lower body and another punched his right side and his face.

Apodaca ran inside her house to call 911. She told the dispatch operator, “I think the other guys are trying to rob the place.”

“Ma’am, are you on—is this on Sunrose?” the operator asked, naming the street where Christopher lived.

“Huh?”

“Is this on Sunrose?”

“Yes.”

“O.K. Those are officers that are on that scene.”

Outside, Brown and Hilger tried to handcuff Christopher, but he tucked his hands underneath him, and flailed his head and legs. On Hilger’s police radio, which was on for just a few seconds, Christopher can be heard yelling, in a high-pitched voice, “I’m a good guy! This is my house!”

The officers tried to pin Christopher to the ground, but they said that he was somehow able to rip his right arm free and grab Hilger’s gun. They said that he wouldn’t let go, even as they punched him. Brown unholstered his pistol, a nine-millimetre handgun that he’d owned since he was sixteen. He pressed the muzzle against Christopher’s back and pulled the trigger. He didn’t hear any noise, and wondered if the gun had malfunctioned. He squeezed the trigger again. This time Christopher said, “Ow.” Christopher was still trying to get up, so Brown shot him in the back a third time.

Apodaca heard the shots, and went back outside and looked through the same hole in the fence. This time, she saw Christopher lying down, facing the ground. He was handcuffed, but he wasn’t moving. The two men stood next to Christopher’s body, looking down. A few minutes later, Emergency Medical Services arrived. One man picked up Christopher’s legs and another lifted his shoulders, and they carried him out of the back yard.





The day after the shooting, Apodaca went to the office of a lawyer, a family friend, and told him that she had witnessed her neighbor's death. "The way I saw him treated—I just couldn't put that together," she said. While she was there, the lawyer called an officer he knew in the police department, and told him that there was an eyewitness to Christopher Torres's shooting. For several months, Apodaca waited in vain for someone from the department to call her.

Albuquerque lies at the intersection of two interstate highways, one stretching from California to the East Coast and the other from Texas to Wyoming. A local saying is that many citizens, intending to drive from one coast to the other and start a new life, end up living in Albuquerque when they run out of money. A fifth of the residents live below the poverty line, many of them in the southeast part of the city, which is often called the "war zone." Wealthy residents tend to live in the northeastern corner, at the foot of the Sandia Mountains. The division reflects the social climate throughout the state, which has the widest income gap between rich and poor in the country. Gilbert Najar, the director of the police academy in Silver City, New Mexico, who worked for the Albuquerque Police Department for twenty-five years, told me that the department "did policing one way in the South Valley, where there were a lot of immigrant families and people of lower socioeconomic status, and we knew we could violate their rights. But we did not dare commit those tactics in the affluent neighborhoods, where we knew they would file complaints on us."

Since 1987, the police department has shot at least a hundred and forty-six people. The shooting of Michael Brown, in Ferguson, Missouri, looked almost routine to people in Albuquerque. They had seen such incidents many times before. Few people protested, and no one paid much attention. Police violence appeared to be a matter of concern only to Albuquerque's underclass: those who are mentally ill, addicted to drugs, Native American, or Hispanic and poor. David Correia, a professor of American studies at the



*"LinkedIn has finally paid off—it got me two new followers on Twitter."*

University of New Mexico, told me, "There's this myth here of tri-cultural harmony—indigenous people, Mexican-Americans, and Anglos—but this precarious arrangement is built on a long history of violence against Spanish-speaking and indigenous people that still plays out."

The city has hired a succession of experts, a new research team every few years, to analyze the police department's use of force, but officials seem to have viewed the act of commissioning a report as a proxy for doing something about the problem. Samuel Walker, an expert in police accountability who was hired in 1996 to co-author one of the reports, after the police killed thirty-two people in ten years, said, "When we gave an oral presentation to the city council, I had a very strong impression that many city-council members were not interested." He described his conversation with Martin Chávez, the mayor, as one of the most hostile interviews he's ever conducted. He said that the police chief would not look him in the eyes when he briefed him. One city-council member refused to meet with him or return his calls.

His report highlighted the department's incompetence in responding to people with mental illnesses. The city lacks a comprehensive mental-health-care system, and cops are often called to assist people in the midst of

psychotic episodes. When these people don't follow the officers' orders, they are sometimes beaten or shot. Grover, the former sergeant, told me that "there was a running joke within the department: don't threaten suicide with officers, because they'll accelerate it."

Five years after Walker's report, and fourteen more fatal shootings, another task force concluded that the department needed to create an oversight system in which officers would suffer consequences for abusing their authority. In 2006, after sixteen more deaths, the city hired a team of consultants to do another report, which noted that "many recommendations made in this report are based on issues voiced by the prior consultants that are still valid and should be addressed."

When Mayor Richard Berry took office, in 2009, his transition team tried to draw his attention to a speech, delivered by an ethics scholar at an international conference for police chiefs, called "How Police Departments Become Corrupt." The speech described the four stages of dysfunction in a police force. The transition team said that the department appeared to have entered the third: employees abide by the "unwritten rules of internal politics"; leaders are promoted because of their relationships, not their work; and officers "rationalize doing unethical things during conversations

with each other.” In its report on the department, the transition team wrote that the department showed at least one sign of having entered the fourth stage, exhibiting a commitment to “keep corruption out of the newspapers at any cost.”

The report contained seven paragraphs about corruption; but, by the time it was submitted to the mayor’s office, in November, 2009, those paragraphs had been deleted. In their place was a discussion of the problem of “serial inebriates,” citizens who drained the department’s resources. Paul Heh, a senior sergeant, presented the original version of the report at a city-council meeting in 2011, but he was told after two minutes that he had exceeded the time limit for speaking, even though he had arranged to speak longer. The city council voted on whether Heh should be permitted to continue his speech, and ruled against him.

Heh worked for the department for twenty-four years, and he said that early in his tenure he noticed that small lapses went unpunished. The department’s rules stated that “personnel will not write a police report of alleged officer misconduct in the line of duty either by citizen request or of their own initiative.” Supervisors were responsible for handling claims of misconduct, a policy that allowed them to screen the account that entered official records. Samson Costales, a retired officer, said, “They tell us that we have to cover for each other, because we are a brotherhood, and brothers in blue don’t like rats,” a mentality that he said he learned from his training officers. “You don’t challenge another officer; you don’t testify against him—you lie if you have to. The code existed long before I was a police officer, and I can’t see it ever going away.”

It was widely known that many people in the department were having extramarital affairs with other officers. “These guys would pass these female officers from one to another,” Heh said. “It all grew from there.” Cassandra Morrison, a sergeant who retired in 2013, described the department as an “old-boys’ club,” where certain men became untouchable. “As women, we were thought of as a subculture,” she said. “If you wanted to move up, you had to kiss

somebody’s ass, rub somebody’s elbow, take somebody out to dinner, or have sex with somebody.” The social hierarchy in the department rewarded an exaggerated masculine ethos, which Schultz seemed to encourage. When asked by a local reporter about extramarital affairs within the department, he pointed out that his officers were young, attractive, and in good shape.

## ESSAY ON CLOUDS

Maybe a whale,  
as Hamlet mused, or a camel or weasel,  
more likely a hill,

or many hills (with clouds,  
as with us, true singletons are rare).  
Mostly we compare them

to silent things, sensing  
that thunder is something else  
that gets into them—a stone, a god—

and, as for what they want to say,  
aeromancy, which presumed to interpret,  
never caught on. After all,

clouds weren’t reliable predictors  
even of rain, and if they had a message  
for us, we guessed,

it would hardly be practical:  
clouds are not about  
*about*, showing instead

boundless detail without specificity.  
Whales, sure (which might in turn be  
blue clouds), but we don’t say

*How very like a screwdriver,*  
*or my house, or my uncle, or certainly*  
*how unlike my uncle.* For though a blend

of winds we don’t at our level  
necessarily feel lends them  
amazing motion, that’s not the same as

intention, so failure  
is not in question. We wouldn’t say  
*That cloud is derivative, jejune,*

*disproportionate, strained, in the wrong place,*  
or (since they affirm nothing)  
*That cloud is wrong,*

“There’s nature at play,” he explained.

In the legal-training materials distributed to officers, the lesson on strip searches featured a cartoon of five male officers staring through the window at a silhouette of a naked woman—with a shapely butt and enormous breasts, which she is fondling—the object of their search. The lesson on arresting prostitutes showed a drawing of a hairy



though truly they often bear down  
on exactly the wrong moment—that overcast,  
is it one cloud or ten thousand

that makes everything feel so gray  
forever? From inside, of course—think  
of flying through one—

a cloud has no shape. As with us: only  
when someone looks hard, or we catch  
our reflections, do we solidify as

*whale*  
*weasel*  
*fool*

and plummet. Large clouds can weigh  
more than a 747, yet not one  
has ever crashed, so admirably

do they spread their weight, a gift  
it is not too much to hope  
we could possess, since according to Porchia

*we are clouds: If I were stone*  
*and not cloud, my thoughts,*  
*which are wind, would abandon me. O*

miracle not miraculous! Everything  
we know well  
lightens and escapes us, and isn't that

when *we* escape? So, just as  
Old and Middle English *clūd*  
meant *rock* or *hill*, but now

means *cloud*, really I mean  
in exactly the same way that stone  
got over being stone

and rose, we rise.

—James Richardson

transvestite with a single breast, which droops to her potbelly. “How d’ya know I ain’t jus another purty face out shop-pin’ fer my family?” she asks the officer who has come to arrest her.

Morrison said that officers were socialized to be cynical about civilians. “We’re taught to almost dehumanize them,” she said. “It just got to the point where it’s, like, they’re a piece of shit.

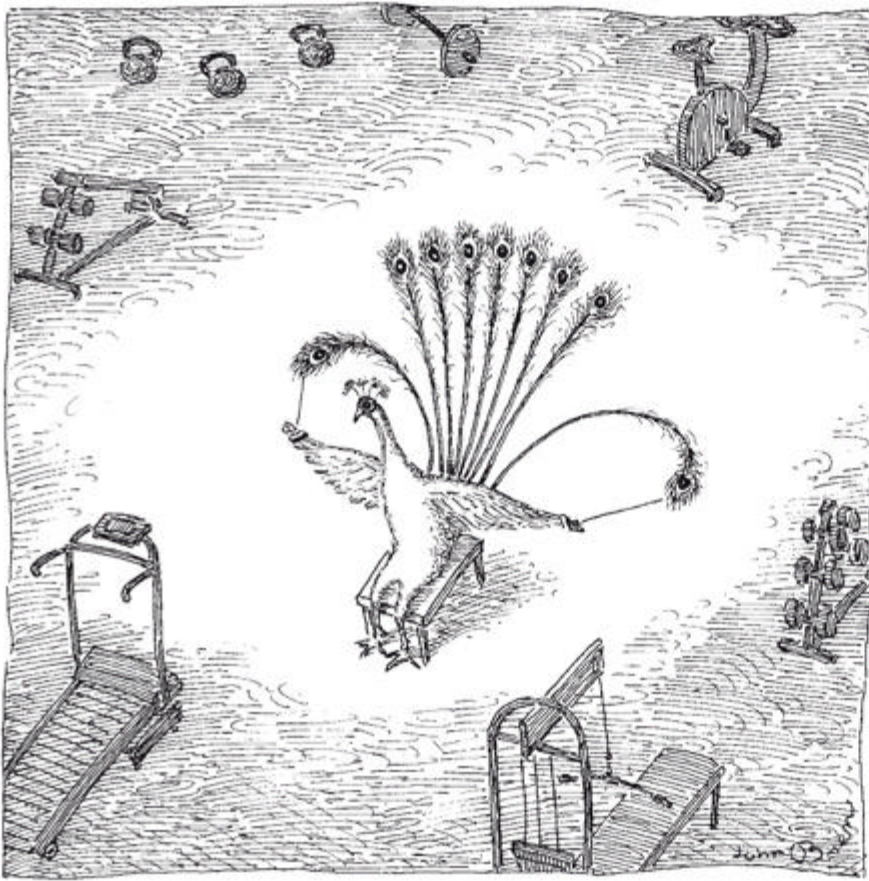
We don’t care if they raped a baby or were speeding in traffic—everybody’s a piece of shit.” Early in her career, she was often injured, because she fought with people while arresting them. Then she took a forty-hour course offered by the department in crisis-intervention training, a model used by many police departments to help officers communicate with suspects, particularly those who

are mentally ill. She never got injured on duty again. She became a senior instructor in the class, but it was held in low regard by many of her colleagues. By 2007, fewer than thirty officers were taking the course each year.

The Albuquerque Police Department acquired weapons and resources from both the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the Defense Department, which lends police departments surplus military gear. Until recently, officers were also permitted to come to work with guns that they had bought themselves. For some, the weapons functioned as status symbols; expensive, military-style ones were valued highly. Najar, the police-academy director, said that the leaders of the Albuquerque police force, like those of many departments around the country, stated publicly that they subscribed to the theories of community policing, a model that encourages officers to embed themselves in the communities they serve, but that those ideals never permeated the culture of the department. The people the cops arrested were usually strangers. Officers approached them with “all their fears and biases and prejudices,” he said.

Two and a half months after Christopher’s death, Stephen Torres wrote to Mayor Berry, alerting him that another unarmed man had just been killed by police. An officer hired the same year as Brown had shot a twenty-two-year-old man who appeared to be in the midst of a mental breakdown. The officer, Sean Wallace, thought that the man was holding a gun. It turned out to be a spoon. Shortly after the shooting, Wallace received five hundred dollars from the Albuquerque police union, which routinely gave money to officers to help them “decompress” after a shooting, according to a statement issued by the union’s president and vice-president. Wallace had already shot two other unarmed men, killing one of them. He has since received a department award for outstanding service.

Stephen told the Mayor, “I trust that you agree with us that we do have a problem.” He noted that he still had not heard from Schultz or anyone in the police department. “May we please hear from you?” he wrote. A few months later, when Schultz’s mother



died, Stephen wrote him a sympathy card. “I was still thinking maybe we would work on this together,” Stephen told me.

One of Renetta’s friends, Jewel Hall, the president of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Center, which promotes diversity and human rights in Albuquerque, met with Mayor Berry in July, 2011, and asked him to join her and other activists in inviting the U.S. Justice Department to investigate civil-rights violations by the police department. She believed that the shootings reflected an “élite attitude toward certain neighborhoods and certain citizens.” She added, “Their lives are not valued by those in charge.” The meeting was brief. Berry told her he thought that Albuquerque’s police force was one of the finest in the country. (Later, when the city council passed a resolution requesting that the Justice Department investigate the police force, Berry vetoed the measure.)

Renetta worked in the same building as Berry, and when they ended up

in the same elevator they would greet each other awkwardly and then look away. When Renetta ran into him or other top city officials, she imagined that they were thinking, There must be some reason that they killed your son. (Berry told me, “We don’t think any less of the Torreses as a family, and I hope they wouldn’t think any less of us, even though this is a tragic situation.”)

Having worked in government for thirty-three years, Renetta said that she didn’t expect the city to respond to her husband’s pleas. “You don’t know these people,” she told him. Stephen worried that Renetta’s cynicism was a symptom of grief. “She worries me,” he said. “She doesn’t think that the city gives a damn.”

Ray Schultz told me he knew that Stephen Torres was waiting for him to call, but that he couldn’t contact the Torres family, because he didn’t want to compromise the internal-affairs investigation into Christopher’s death. Although the internal review was completed roughly a month after the shooting—a police-department detective interviewed Hilger

and Brown in the presence of a union attorney, a union representative, and a “buddy officer,” who provided emotional support—the case still had to be considered by an Independent Review Officer, who was supposed to produce another set of findings, which the department would then review. Schultz said that when he retired, in 2013, this process had yet to be completed.

According to Schultz, a few wayward officers were responsible for the shooting deaths. “Like any other organization, you have that two per cent that are making bad decisions,” he said. In November, 2012, the Department of Justice announced that it would investigate the Albuquerque police force. In a memo, Schultz informed commanders that “most likely the DOJ will find that APD has its house in order. . . . Have your officers stand tall and be proud to be part of our great department.”

Stephen and Renetta Torres met regularly with other parents whose children had been killed by the police. “We are the family that no one wants to be part of,” Ken Ellis, one of the parents, told me. In 2010, his son, a twenty-five-year-old Iraq War veteran, threatened suicide by pointing a handgun at his head outside a convenience store. Several police officers tried to negotiate with him, until an officer saw him “twitch” and shot him in the neck. Ellis drove a truck covered with images of the faces of his son and eleven other young men who had been fatally shot by Albuquerque officers. On one of the back windows, he had a picture of Christopher Torres, wearing a Hawaiian shirt and tentatively smiling. Ellis said that officers had approached him and advised him to take down the pictures, but he refused.

Like many of the families, the Torreses filed a lawsuit against the police department shortly after their son was killed. They also asked the district attorney to press charges. Renetta said that, among the families, paranoia became normal. On her iPhone, she kept seeing an invitation to join a wireless network called Surveillance Van 2. Her neighbor Richard Simes noticed it, too, and drove around the neighborhood looking for the source. He eventually installed surveillance cameras in



front of his house and reviewed the footage every day. He said that if he found himself in a crisis he wouldn't call the Albuquerque police.

Christie Apodaca, the eyewitness, found herself minimizing the time she spent outside her house. The police department had not contacted her, but she noticed a police car parked on the street in front of her house almost every day for seven months. "He could have been there for another reason," she said. "But I found it very strange that when I walked out to see what was going on he would drive away."

The Torreses' daughter-in-law, Nicol, their son Daniel's wife, said she initially assumed that everyone was being skittish. Then she and her husband noticed that Albuquerque officers kept cruising around their small suburb, even though it was outside the city limits. She told me, "As a white person from the East Coast, with no run-ins with the law, I was very naïve." Nicol is a research psychologist for the county's juvenile-detention center, and she believes that her response to Christopher's death—she was vocal at city-council meetings—has foreclosed the possibility of promotions at work. People avoid her in the hallways. "I don't get invited to the meetings that I used to, because the mayor will be there or the chief of police will be there," she said. "No one is going to come out and say, 'Your career is ruined,' but these are the signs." One day after work, she found a note wedged underneath her windshield wiper. It said, "Shut up and watch what you're doing."

The Torreses' oldest son, Matthew, who is a lawyer, sometimes crossed paths with Officer Brown at the courthouse. It infuriated him to know that Brown was testifying in other cases, and that his statements were trusted in court. "He still thinks he's a cop and I have no business glaring at him," he said. "I think he murdered my brother, and I'll do everything I can to make him uncomfortable."

When Matthew saw that Brown had arrested someone for marijuana possession and that the defendant had no lawyer, he took on the case for nothing, even though his practice is devoted to family law. At the first hearing, he requested that the judge allow him to interview Brown about his unethical be-

havior. Matthew said that the judge looked bewildered—the defendant hadn't even shown up in court—and called for a recess. Then she dismissed the case.

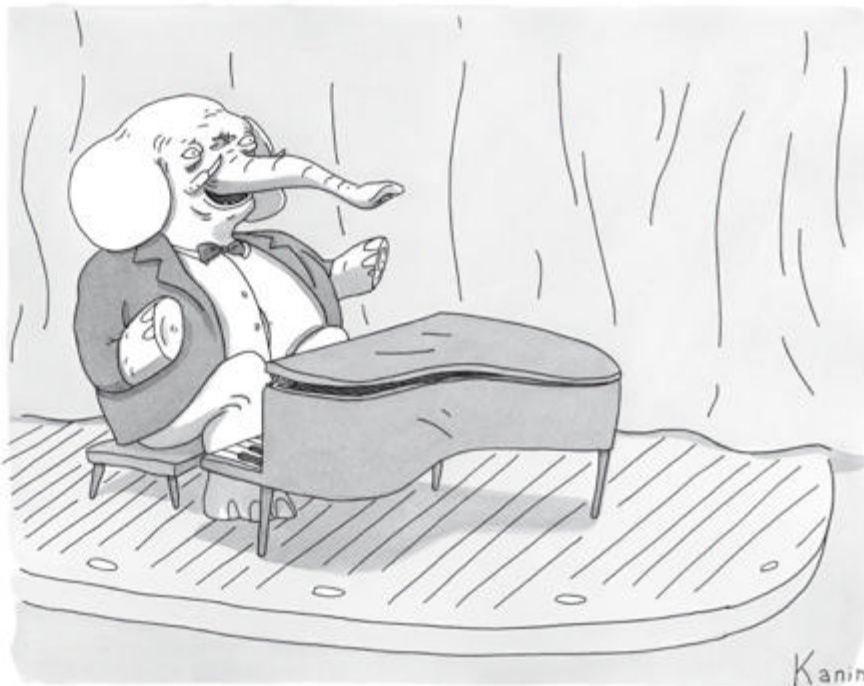
**I**n thirty years, no officer in Albuquerque has been indicted for shooting someone. Until recently, officer shootings were evaluated by what the district attorney called an "investigative grand jury." The jurors did not have the authority to indict, even if they wanted to. They were tasked only with determining whether a shooting was "justified" or "not justified."

The grand jury lent the process an illusion of objectivity: the district attorney could say that the decision rested with citizens. But prosecutors are dependent on their relationships with police, and the grand jury's decisions—every shooting in Albuquerque was deemed "justified"—may reveal less about the facts of each case than about the way that prosecutors presented it. After an article on investigative grand juries in the *Albuquerque Journal*, by a reporter named Jeff Proctor—one of the few local journalists who consistently questioned the police department's narrative about its shootings—a judge asked

the district attorney, Kari Brandenburg, to suspend the practice, in 2013. Brandenburg now reviews the details of police shootings herself and determines whether or not to put the case before a more conventional grand jury.

It took nearly three years for Brandenburg to decide that there was not enough evidence to charge the officers who killed Christopher Torres. She based her decision on the police department's internal report, which was finally released to the Torreses' lawyers, Randi McGin and Kathy Love, in 2013. The thirty-nine-page report never mentions Christie Apodaca. It notes that if Christopher were still alive he would have been charged with resisting arrest, disarming a police officer, and aggravated battery on a police officer, in addition to the charges that brought the officers to Christopher's home. The report was titled "Aggravated Battery on a Police Officer." The first page identified Christopher as the suspect. The State of New Mexico was listed as the victim.

In the years leading up to Brandenburg's decision, the Torreses' lawyers met with Brandenburg three times. They tried to persuade her to indict the officers in Christopher's death, because the public had lost faith in the



*"Who's ready to hear a lot of adjacent keys played simultaneously?"*

police department. Brandenburg, a chatty woman whose office is decorated with animal knickknacks, told the lawyers that she disagreed. She remarked that when she goes to the grocery store or the dentist's office people approach her and say, "I think the police are doing a good job, and they ought to shoot more criminals." Brandenburg told me that she still hears this sentiment. The people who make these comments are "not evil people," she said. "But they lack understanding. They talk as if it doesn't matter if somebody were to die."

Four months after Brandenburg declined to bring charges, the Torres family won its civil lawsuit. The judge referred to statements by Apodaca, who testified at the trial, and wrote that she found no credible evidence that Christopher had threatened the cops with a gun. Brown, in his testimony, wouldn't admit to regretting any decisions. "My choice to jump over the fence was a reaction to his choice not to partake in our conversation," he said. "If you are asking me 'would've's' or 'could've's,' I mean, I could have not gone to work that day."

Richard Hilger appeared more tentative. He said that Christopher, in his attempt to fight the officers, delivered only a "glancing blow" that did not injure anyone. He also acknowledged that

some officers in the department might feel pressure to lie in order to corroborate a partner's story.

Shortly after the civil trial, the Department of Justice published a report detailing how the police fostered a "culture that emphasizes force and complete submission over safety." The Department of Justice then began negotiating a settlement agreement with the city and the police force. In an e-mail last June, the chief of police, Gorden Eden, who was appointed in early 2014, wrote to his dispatch operators, "Please comply and advise your people: NO one is to meet with DOJ—no one!! DOJ and its representatives have held several meetings with APD officers. This is a CRITICAL MATTER! No one. Make it clear to everyone, it's got to stop immediately."

The Department of Justice has investigated more than fifteen police departments in the past four years, and its description of police practices in Albuquerque is arguably the most disparaging. The settlement agreement, which was released this fall, requires that all officers use body cameras (which had previously been required but whose use had not been strictly enforced); that the specialized units, including the canine, bomb, and SWAT teams, more clearly document and justify their activities; and that the department establish a committee that will develop

new policies for responding to people who are chronically homeless or mentally ill. To address what it called a culture of "pervasive and deliberate leniency," the agreement instructs that supervisors in the department be far more vigilant about documenting misconduct. But it does not seek sanctions against officers who had previously used excessive force. Eden said that, in part because of the department's contract with the police union, "it's almost impossible to do retroactive discipline, once the time frame has expired." If officers resist the reforms, Eden said, he will encourage them to retire.

Mayor Berry, who was reelected in 2013, told me he hoped that the department, by implementing the required reforms, would make Albuquerque a model for the rest of the nation. He traced the number of fatal shootings to the lack of mental-health services in the city, but declined to speculate about other factors that had led the department to its current state. "I just don't spend any of my time or energy worrying about who did what, why, and when," he said. "The last thing I want to do as mayor is play the blame game."

The officers who killed Christopher Torres have never been disciplined. They returned to work after three days of paid leave. Renetta and Stephen Torres are skeptical that the culture and values of the department can change when the cops have not been held accountable. Many of the families who have protested the department's shootings believed that officers would be charged in the deaths of their sons. When the district attorney declined to bring charges in their own case, they had set their hopes on the cases of other families. Now there is only one case left that has a chance of going to trial: the shooting of James Boyd, a homeless schizophrenic man whose death, last March, was captured on video.

Boyd had been camping illegally in the mountains when an officer ordered him to gather his belongings, including two small knives, and sleep somewhere else. Boyd responded to the request by making threatening, nonsensical comments. Soon, forty-one officers reported



*"Our brand is about talking about our brand."*



to the mountain, and several of them pointed rifles at Boyd. An officer named Keith Sandy, who had been hired the same year as Brown, called Boyd a “fucking lunatic” and joked to a colleague that he’d like to fire a Taser shotgun at Boyd’s penis. (He later told detectives that he and his colleagues talked so much “garbage to one another” that they developed a safe word, “china,” so that they would know when to stop joking.) As Boyd bent down to pick up his belongings, Sandy threw a flash-bang grenade at his feet. When Boyd reached into his pocket and brought out his knives, Sandy and another officer fired six shots at him with their assault rifles. It was the department’s thirty-ninth shooting since 2010. (When citizens protested the shooting by marching through the city, an undercover officer, dressed as a hippie, walked along, videotaping activists.)

Last October, Kari Brandenburg told a police-union attorney that she was leaning toward filing murder charges against the officers who shot Boyd. Within weeks, Brandenburg found herself the target of an investigation by the Albuquerque Police Department. Her twenty-six-year-old son, who was addicted to heroin, had stolen thousands of dollars of his friends’ belongings, and Brandenburg had offered to reimburse them. In late November, an Albuquerque detective gave the state attorney general an investigative file that he said showed that Brandenburg had bribed and intimidated witnesses. In a recording of a conversation between officers working on the case, a detective with the Criminal Intelligence Unit acknowledged that the evidence against Brandenburg appeared insubstantial. He said, “There might be charges—they’re super-weak—it’s probably not gonna go anywhere, but it’s gonna destroy a career.”

A week after the investigation became public, Brandenburg told me that she would continue as district attorney, despite calls for her to leave the office. When I asked her if she saw the investigation as a form of intimidation, a way to prevent her from indicting the officers who shot Boyd, she said, “I think right now it’s best if other people connect the dots.”

On January 12th, Brandenburg filed counts of murder against the two officers who shot Boyd. The case will now



go before a district judge, who will determine if there is probable cause to send the officers to trial. At a press conference announcing the charges, Brandenburg said, “I am not going to be intimidated.”

The next day, the Albuquerque police shot and killed another person. According to the police department, the man, who was suspected of stealing, ran away from the officers and fired his gun in their direction. Two cops returned fire, killing the man. One of the cops had killed a civilian in 2011 and the other had been sued in 2010 for using excessive force. Brandenburg sent a prosecutor from her office to the scene of the crime, as she has at every officer shooting in the past decade. But, for the first time, the police barred the prosecutor from attending the police briefing or participating in the investigation. The police department’s attorney told her to go home, saying that her legal advice was not needed.

The Torreses disagree about whether the city has ever apologized to them. Last summer, Mayor Berry met with Stephen and two other fathers, Ken Ellis and Michael Gomez, whose sons had been shot by police officers, men who have since been promoted. Berry extended his condolences and said that he prayed for them. Stephen is satisfied that it was, he said, “as close to an apology as the Mayor’s legal team would allow him.” Renetta, who still

hopes that someone will accept responsibility for Christopher’s death, considered this another instance of a politician knowing when to use “nice little phrases.” “It’s hard to be encouraged when you’ve already seen so much double-talk,” she said.

When Christopher’s death was first described by the police department, Stephen had contemplated suing the city for slander, until he realized that the dead have no right to be protected from defamation. He couldn’t understand how Christopher, in the course of an afternoon, had been turned into a stereotype: a dangerous schizophrenic. The family had rarely told people about Christopher’s diagnosis, because they were wary of the meanings that people ascribed to the word. Christopher’s first psychiatrist had told the family, “Let’s hope it’s a brain tumor and not schizophrenia, because a tumor we can do something about.”

Renetta said that she struggled to accept that “you can’t always set things right in the world of your child.” She believed that Christopher had been getting better every year. The side effects from the medications, like muscle stiffness and lethargy, had become less distracting. He was opening up to the idea of going to school. He still heard occasional voices, but, for the most part, he had stopped believing what they said. “Christopher was trying to figure out, ‘How do I fit in?’” Renetta said. “He was so close to finding his way.” ♦

## THE DRIVER'S SEAT

*What we learn when we learn to drive.*

BY ADAM GOPNIK

I decided to learn to drive because I wanted to learn to drive. I wasn't, I told anyone who would listen, searching for a metaphor of middle age, or declaring my emancipation from my pedestrian past, or making up for time wasted in the passenger seat. There's a rich literature about learning to drive written by women, for whom it represents a larger emancipation from the feminine roles of enforced passivity, of sitting in place and accepting helplessness. That wasn't my "issue." I wanted to learn to drive because I wanted to make a vehicle move in an orderly direction forward and around corners and to necessary places.

I didn't know how to drive for reasons that seemed to me obvious and accidental and psychologically uncomplicated. My parents, who worked a few blocks from our apartment, didn't have a car for a few brief years that happened to coincide with my teenage ones. Then, in my early twenties, I found myself in New York, where people don't have cars, and where, among a thousand enterprises in transportation, from learning to roller skate to mastering the transfer from the No. 6 train to the R to get to Times Square, taking the time to learn to drive seemed the least worthwhile. The years, and the decades, had flown past, and on that once-a-year summer occasion when we rented a car and set off for Cape Cod, my wife, Martha, who grew up in a semi-suburb of Montreal and had her license at eighteen, did the driving. She was a terrific, expert, careful driver, and the last thing we seemed to need in the family was another. I simply wanted to be her relief chauffeur—a middle-inning guy, able to go to the pond on an August morning or to the drive-in movie theatre on an August evening. I wanted to be able to get ice cream at night and cinnamon buns in the morning.

Of course, there were other, more ignoble motives pressing on the decision to learn. Even as a feminist in a feminist age, I sometimes felt that I was in the wrong seat. Instead of sitting where generations of fathers have sat, pressing down on pedals and cursing the competition on the road, I had spent decades in the traditional mother's seat, filling her role—shushing the children when the driver was tired or looking for the exit, or holding out the paper bag of cookies to unseen, waiting hands in the back. When the rental-car man or the gas-station attendant approached the driver's seat and saw me in the "wrong" one, I immediately glared and scowled in what I imagined to be a persuasive impersonation of a hugely overskilled driver, the kind whose license has finally been taken away by the cops, however reluctantly, after a lifetime of dangerous but entertaining high-speed, "Dukes of Hazzard"-like performance. (Though I accept that these gender roles are nine-tenths "constructed," invented, and cast, still, that does not make it less of a temptation to play another: that the clown wants to play Hamlet does not mean he thinks that the actor playing Hamlet is actually a prince.)

My immediate trigger, though, was simpler: my son, Luke, turning twenty, had to get *his* license—he was a sophomore at a liberal-arts college just out of town—and various Robert Bly-Iron John type scenarios of manhood achieved and passed on still existed somewhere in the Walter Mitty theatre of my mind. "Let's learn to drive together," I said. But where, in the typical contemporary memoir, the troubled youth and the alienated father would silently acknowledge their vexed journey toward expertise and adulthood, he merely gave me an opaque look and asked if I was really sure this was a good idea, and had I run it by Mom? "Your reflexes are a bit funny,

Dad," he said. I made a joke about being guys together, he mumbled something about "gender fluidity," which he had been studying in college, and we agreed to go to the Department of Motor Vehicles together and take the test for learner's permits.

The D.M.V. has become such a byword for bureaucratic indifference and big-government horrors that it was nice to discover that the 125th Street branch, at least, was about as well-run a place as one could hope to find. As we waited, I insisted that the reason government bureaus could seem so bureaucratic was that, by their nature, they have to be inclusive, and they can't inflict the basic market rationale of price differences upon their customers. If the privileged could pay more for quicker service, they would, but this would undermine the premises of citizenship. That first-class passengers get a shorter line through security claws at our idea of citizenship, which ought to include the notion that the rich and the poor suffer the indignities and delays of common civic cause equally. That this has never happened—the rich could buy their way out of Civil War conscription—doesn't make it less of an ideal. I want David Koch waiting in line alongside his chauffeur to be checked for hidden bombs and razors.

I was talking too much, and too quickly, because I was nervous beyond words about the test. I hadn't taken a test in many years, and I was afraid that I hadn't studied the little booklet of road rules well enough. People do fail the written test, and in New York State more than half of those who take the road test fail that one. "Dad, it's easy—it's multiple choice," Luke said, as we waited to enter the test-taking room. "There will be two answers that are obviously wrong. Then there will be two sort of plausible ones. If





*The instructor had me pull out and make a left turn on the avenue, and there I was—in rush-hour traffic on the Upper East Side.*

you just choose the plausible ones at random you'll get fifty per cent. Since you do know *something*, you'll get more than half of that right for sure. You can't help passing." The American social truth—that what we spend years teaching our children is essentially to spot the two obviously wrong answers—was the essential truth of the D.M.V., too. The larger social truth Luke was touching on, that being good at passing tests has relatively little to do with being good at what those tests are supposed to be testing, in the end came to haunt my entire experience of learning to drive.

I passed the test and got my permit, with a suitably grim photograph, and the very next week I signed up with a driving school in Manhattan that was supposed to be particularly good with later-in-life students. At five-thirty on a Tuesday afternoon, I got into the driver's seat of a car parked outside my apartment building and advertised on the side as "Student Driver." I noticed that various catchphrases had been laboriously written out in block letters on adhesive tape and stuck to the dashboard: "NOODLES!!!" and "BUSY BEE!!!" and "GSSLG!"

"I love it, yuuusss, I *love* it!" Arturo Leon, my driving instructor, said with more enthusiasm than I expected, as I adjusted my mirrors, trying to recall how my father had always aligned these things. And then, to my shock—I expected to be eased into the pool, inch by inch—he had me pull out into the street and make a left turn on the adjoining avenue, and there I was—at rush hour on the Upper East Side, heading north among impatient taxicabs, doing what I suppose was a steady, frightened fifteen miles an hour, while the world roared and bleated around me, speeding past our little car. Arturo, I noticed, kept his foot alarmingly well away from the extra brake on his side in the specially prepared student car.

Panic enveloped me. Taxis were honking furiously—furious, I dimly realized, at me! "Let's give him the hand," Arturo said, showing me a gen-

tle, palm-out wave. "Just give him the hand: 'Yes, thank you for sharing.' " He was addressing the car alongside us as its driver yelled soundlessly. He smiled. We moved forward up the avenue. Driving was like a nightmare, or, rather, like a dream I had had many times at the age of six or seven, of being behind the wheel of my father's car and moving forward, floating forward. I broke out in a sweat—up Madison into the South Bronx, incredibly doing this thing.

Though I kept my eyes mostly pointed rigidly ahead, in the moments when we stopped at a red light ("I want to see the floor under the car ahead of us," Arturo would instruct me, and it took me a while to understand that by "floor" he meant the asphalt street surface; that, a city boy like me, he thought that everything flat and low on the ground *was* a floor), I got to study my teacher. Cherub-faced and immense, he worked nights as a d.j. with his brother, loved to sing scraps of old Motown songs as we drove, and thought that rush-hour Manhattan and the crowded shopping streets of Arthur Avenue and Third Avenue in the South Bronx, where he lived, were the perfect arena for learning to drive. As I drove, struggling to keep the terror down, Arturo kept up a non-stop patter. He was a great teacher and a champion talker, somehow managing to be both elaborately formal—he couched any direction, even a last-minute, life-saving one, as a polite request—and cheerily intimate: I learned about his Ecuadorean parentage and his immigrant upbringing, his failed marriage, his two beloved children, and his future prospects, both erotic and professional.

"O.K., we're going uptown, please continue straight ahead—excellent," he would say casually, hissing the "xc." And then: "I love it!" We would head north to approach the Madison Avenue Bridge, or the Willis Avenue Bridge, or the Third Avenue Bridge—all bridges of which I had previously been unaware. "Do I turn here?" I would say, my voice shaky, as livery drivers and cabbies raced around and ahead of me. "If you would just push the car slightly left just here?"

he would reply. "Just slide over. Just *slide* into the left lane. Just look and signal and *sliiiide*. Thank you! Thank you! Excellent. I'm so happy with the way you did that." He started to sing: "Because I'm happy/Clap along if you feel like a room without a roof./ Because I'm happy/Clap along if you feel like happiness is the truth." And then: "Thank you for doing that so easily. And we'll just continue here, and now I'm going to stop you *here*." He nimbly slipped his foot sideways onto his own brake, as, coming off the bridge at my steady fifteen m.p.h., I narrowly missed a sixteen-wheeler coming the other way. The truck driver blasted his horn—his steam siren, really—and Arturo waved gently at him. "Let's give him the hand, right here," he said. "The hand means thank you, bless you, fuck you. The hand means everything we need it to mean. Oh, thank you so much for signalling to us! Sharing is caring!" He would smile serenely, while slipping in through his smile an obscenity directed at the truck driver for my benefit, and I would laugh and give the truck driver the hand, too. Then Arturo would lean back and let me drive while he told me about his kids—Bryan Armany and Hillary Alizé—and his struggles to keep them in a straight line at school, about his father's bad health and his mother's love.

"Become the noodle!" he kept insisting, and I soon learned that this meant to relax completely, go limp from head to toe. His constant talk, I decided, was intended to *make* you become the noodle by not allowing you to think too much. Dread is always the product of imagination. You see the bad consequence coming and the image paralyzes your judgment. Arturo had me on the F.D.R. Drive at rush hour before I had a chance to think about it.

Two or three times a week, we would spend a couple of hours driving, up to the South Bronx and back again. (Luke did five hours, and it was a wrap: he was ready for the road test.) Arturo would have me crawl along Arthur Avenue and Third Avenue, learning the complicated timing necessary to avoid pedestrians crossing against the light, and then go out into the empty, boarded-over areas of the borough, to practice parallel parking and three-point turns. Then he would reward me by taking





me out onto one of the big highways, the Bruckner or the F.D.R., where I could, unbelievably, go forty miles an hour and negotiate lanes like a cabbie, until I found the exit home.

Unlike everything else I've learned to do in midlife, driving negated the usual path of learning: the incremental steps, the breaking down and building up of parts, the curve we go up as one small mastery follows another. Driving, I realized, isn't really difficult; it's just extremely dangerous. You hit the gas and turn the wheel, and there you are—in possession of a two-ton weapon capable of being pointed at anything you like, at any speed you can go at, just by pressing a pedal a little bit harder. The poor people in the crosswalk—the guy in the tank top striding indifferently forward; the mother yanking at her child's hand—had no idea of the danger they were in with me behind the wheel! I had no idea of the danger I am in doing the same thing, day after day. Cars are terrifying, and cars are normality itself.

This discrepancy between difficulty and danger is our civilization's signature, from machine guns to atomic bombs. You press a pedal and two tons of metal lurches down the city avenue; you pull a trigger and twenty enemies die; you waggle a button and cities burn. The point of living in a technologically advanced society is that minimal effort can produce maximal results. Making hard things easy is the path to convenience; it is also the lever of catastrophe. The realization of how close to disaster we were at every moment helped press my panic button, and, while Arturo's singing and commentary reduced the panic some, I tried to find other ways to overcome it as well.

One way to calm myself was to become my calm father. Whenever I think of him, I am in the back seat and I see the back of his head, his mesh driving gloves, and his calm voice debating a topic with his children improbably crowded in behind him. (My first memories of life are in the Volkswagen "bug" my parents bought in the late fifties, into whose tiny back seat they introduced, like clowns into a clown car, one child after another, until

there were six.) To see him so is to do a terrible disservice to his accomplishments—a chauffeur is the last thing he was—and yet in another way it is to see him whole, if one translates the act of driving into an act of understated service. He thought little of doing a kind of drive-around of his six children and twelve grandchildren, now dispersed around the continent like pieces on a game board. From rural Ontario to Boston to Ann Arbor to Berkeley to Washington to New York—the driving would last fifteen or sixteen hours, and he would emerge, bearded and smiling. "I've never had an accident," he liked to say. We were very close when I was a teen-ager, and I loved him more for knowing that I was not remotely like him: he was sound, solid, in his role as a dean paterfamilias to a campus—all things I never hoped to be. My not driving was, in some sense, a response to his driving all the time. We make ourselves in our father's sunshine but also in his shadow: what he beams down we bend away from.

He had been driving, he often recalled, since he was twelve, as a young boy on a farm in Montgomery County,

Pennsylvania, his family, unusually, Jews among the Pennsylvania Dutch. He first drove an Army-surplus jeep, used as a tractor, and at sixteen got his license. He often told me of how, as a teen-ager, having a car was the means not just to autonomy—though it was that: you could get behind the wheel and go to Atlantic City, to Provincetown, even to old Quebec—but to privacy. It enabled a lower-middle-class kid in a fractious, noisy extended family to be alone with his thoughts. He said to me once, when I was small, "You know, you can drive right across the country now without a stoplight." The image stayed with me. (I suspect that the significant things we say to our children usually vanish, while incidental oddities linger.) I wanted to travel with him, but I left the driving to him.

Why, I wondered, had he never encouraged me to drive? Why had he not kept a car when I was a teen-ager? He gave me a driving lesson once—in Italy on a sabbatical leave, as it happened—and it had gone all right. But then he stopped, and he didn't really have to; we didn't have a car, that was true, but there were friends and rentals. If driving mattered so much to him, why would



*"Maybe it means something different in Dolphin?"*

it not to me? Had he failed me in some way, or had I failed him in some way I was still not ready to recognize?

Learning to drive changed my perception of the city. Pre-modern peoples have to be persuaded that what they impute to sentient agency is actually the work of automatic forces: lightning, tides, the moon rising are not the result of gods or demons working their will but just things that happen from consciousness natural forces. I had to persuade myself that what I had grown to attribute to automatic forces was actually the work of agency. The crazy taxi-driver, weaving in and out of traffic, I had always viewed with what was, to my wife, undue calm—he was like a whirlpool in the river's flow, just what was happening naturally. That he was *making* it happen, and should not have been, was not a thought entirely at home in my head. It had never occurred to me that the pulse and movement of traffic was not like the eddies and currents of rivers but a network of decisions made at frantic high speeds by cooperative and conflicting drivers. The deeper truth was that I accepted the action of cars as automatic forces because I thought, in effect, that my father was driving them all. I had always so trusted him up there in the front seat, as a benevolent natural force, that I extended that trust to anyone in that place.

This opacity of agency in car driving, and the ways we try to surmount it, turns out to be the subject of intense academic study. Distilling an argument from some reading, most of it work created under the general aegis of the studies of street traffic done by the sociologist Erving Goffman, I had the sense that it all seemed to intersect on the idea that we regard cars as shells, closed homes, more than as mobile weapons. Traffic is a way of avoiding looking at other people's faces. We like being in cars because they give us my father's teen-age illusion of privacy, and as a consequence we are unduly surprised and even enraged when we are reminded that there are other people like us in them. Road rage is a function of mind blindness induced by the car's enclosure: when we're locked in our car's little confession box, it's easy to arrive at the illusion

that we're the only person out there. We consistently underrate the movements of cars as intentional objects, and then, in an instant, overrate them. A vehicle that obstructs our way is first a mute object in the maze to be avoided and then, suddenly, a menace. This is why the driver acting erratically, unexpectedly pulling ahead, or moseying down Madison at fifteen m.p.h., prompts "You idiot!" rather than "Are you O.K.?"

Arturo's method, assuming that there was one, was, in part, to make driving a car more like walking on a sidewalk, full of recognitions and hand waving and early avoidance, tamping down the sudden shocks that the combustion engine is heir to. Driving so much with Arturo after reading the academics, I not only began to enjoy it but also began to like cars, and to see that driving is one of the last democratic things we do. I had long thought of cars as a weapon against civilization, and had said as much many times in print. They devoured cities, destroyed mass transit, assaulted walkers, greedily demanded parking lots where once there had been public space, and, worst of all, sent families out from dense cities into atomized suburbs. But now I saw that driving was in another way civilization itself: self-organizing, self-controlling, a pattern of agreement and coalition made at high speed and, on the whole, successfully. "Just signal and slide over," Arturo would urge me on the highway, and, as I signalled, other cars—other drivers—actually let me slide over! No cop appeared at the edge of the road to enforce the rule. They just did! Swerving and sliding over is citizenship, and the startling thing is how commonplace and easy it is. It was the essential social contract at work at forty miles an hour. The promised approach of the self-driving car, though it might make the world easier for non-drivers like me—and, given how little I was improving, I thought it quite possible that I would remain a non-driver for life—would still mark a loss in courtesy. "Sharing is caring," Arturo would sing out, again and again, and though he meant it somewhat sardonically, he also really meant it: we were sharing the public road and that alone was a way of caring for our fellow-drivers. Arturo's

all-purpose hand—the one that means "thank you," "fuck you," "who cares about you"—is the proper hand for a citizen. It broadcast civility, while keeping its private meanings to itself.

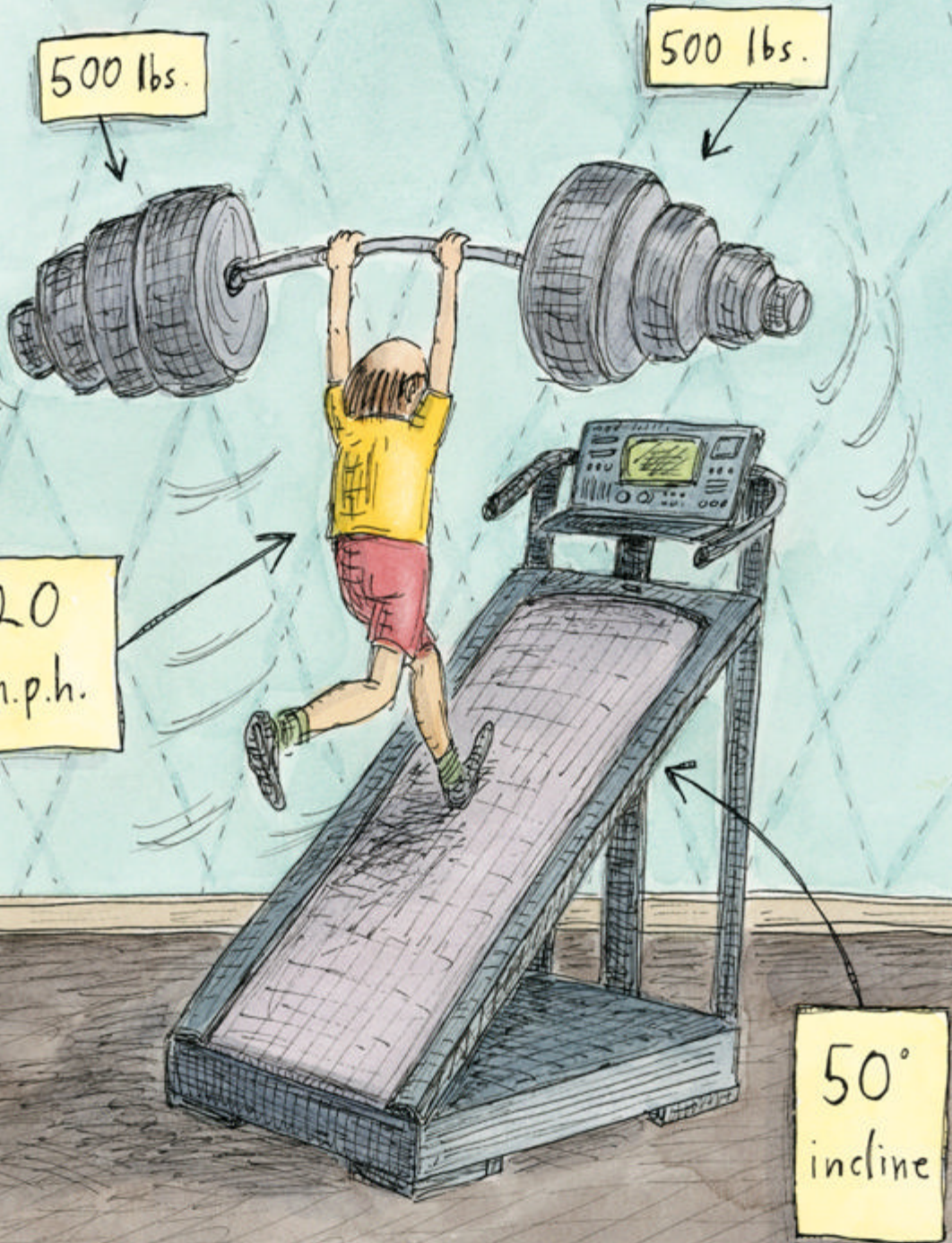
Along the way, Arturo tried to explain to me what he wanted me to do to prepare for the road test that Luke and I had scheduled together, for late October. Tactfully, he tried to get me to see that my job was not just to show that I could turn corners and do three-point turns and parallel park. More, it was to impress the license-giving tester with my readiness to do anything that was required of me, and to do it in a suitably deferential spirit. "They make their decision in the first ten seconds," he explained, over and over. "In the first *five* seconds, just by looking at you. They want to see you work the mirrors, they want to see you check your blind spot—they want to see you *work* your blind spot." He showed me how I needed to behave: twisting my neck around in the car to look over my shoulder, my neck bobbing back and forth inside my collar, like Rodney Dangerfield doing standup for an audience in the back seat.

I complained that I saw what was behind me more clearly if I just faced front and looked in the rearview mirrors. "I know," he said, sighing. "It doesn't matter. You got to be the busy bee anyway! They make up their mind in the *first* second they look at you—it's up to you to show them that you are a safe, skillful, and secure driver by the way you behave when you start up the car, even before you move an inch." He gave me a brief, dispassionate breakdown of the character of the driving judges, who were joined together by pride of office. They liked skill, but they hated arrogance. They wanted *humble* drivers. As Luke had explained to me that the key to the written exam was that it was multiple choice, Arturo was telling me that the key to the road test was that it was *not* multiple choice, it was a game of Simon Says, call and response. The point was to figure out exactly what the tester wanted and then do it.

Over time, Arturo and I became friendly, exchanging confidences about our kids—we both had a boy and a



# THE SEVEN-SECOND WORKOUT



R. Chast

girl, his daughter Hillary named admiringly after Mrs. Clinton, while his son, Bryan Armany, like mine, Luke Auden, had a first name he liked the sound of and the middle name of an artist he admired. We talked a lot about the difficulties of fathering: when to press hard, when to let up—when to be present and when to recede. He was in the middle of managing his father's decline, in and out of hospitals, moments of lucidity rising in a mire of confusion.

One evening, as I dodged the pedestrians in the South Bronx, or they dodged me, Arturo turned toward me. "Adam, I have something I want to ask you."

"Sure, Arturo, what?" He seemed so formal.

"How do you write a book?" he said. "There's a book I have in mind. It's called 'Dream Driving,' all about my way of teaching driving. How you have to think about driving when you're not in the car. How you have to be the busy bee. How you have to shift gear, steer, signal, look, go." That was what that "GSSLG" on his dashboard meant. "How you have to *dream* about driving to drive well. How do you write a book like that?"

Writing a book seemed as mysterious a process to him, one as much in need of elaborate advance and afterthought, as driving a car was to me. The

secret to both—that, really, you sort of just do it—seemed as inadequate an answer to his question as it would have been to any of mine. I stumbled out something about making an outline, thinking through what you wanted to say, making sure that your sentences on the page sounded a little like your voice in life.

"You sort of get better at it the more you write," I said. "You have to just keep writing and then, I promise, it will start to feel easier as you do it."

He paused. "You become the noodle?" he said.

Yes, I agreed. You have to become the noodle to write a book. For the only moment in our time together, he didn't say anything at all.

The day of the road test arrived at last, and I drove all the way to Bronxville, Arturo in the seat beside me, to collect Luke. The tests were being given in a residential neighborhood not far from there.

Any prospect for father-son bonding in road anxiety was quickly dispelled by Luke. "I'm just glad I'm not going to have to come back here after I get my license," he said. There was no doubt at all in his mind that he was going to get it.

I took the exam first. The examiner got into the car beside me. She was a tiny African-American woman, who sank down into the seat, barely coming up to the level of the windshield. She told me briefly

to pull out and make a left turn. I did.

"Why are you so nervous?" she asked me impatiently. "What's making you nervous?"

My soul sank. Was it that obvious? This was getting off to a terrible start.

"The circumstance," I answered, dry-mouthed.

"*What* circumstance? Make a left turn at the light."

"The circumstance of taking a test," I said.

Oddly, that seemed to please her. "Well," she said. Then: "How can you not have a license? How can you *never* have had a license? Where did you grow up?"

I guided the car at what I hoped was the right pace along the streets, and gave her the whole story. She had me park, and do the three-point turn. Then she had me pull over.

"What are *you* going to do with a license?" she demanded.

I smiled weakly. "Take my kids to the ocean," I said at last.

"What ocean? You're going to the damned *Hamptons*?" Her tone was one of amused disdain: she could see right through me to the other side of the street.

"No," I said. "Cape Cod."

"Cape Cod! I like Martha's Vineyard."

"Why?" I came back. I sensed that she wanted me to.

"Why?" she answered. "It reminds me of down South."

"Yes, it does," I said sapiently. "There's a certain resemblance in the foliage..."

"When have you ever been down South?"

I smiled weakly again. She asked me what I did for a living. I told her I wrote.

"I could write a book," she said.

"What about?"

"This!" It was so obvious. "What people do on driving tests."

"Well, tell me one good story that would go in a book," I said. She wanted a little resistance, I felt, some nerve shown from the student.

"There's a million," she said, and she began to work her little handheld computer. After a while, she asked, again, "What are you going to do with this license?"



*"Your contents have shifted."*



My heart leaped as I realized that she was going to give it to me. I was going to be a licensed driver! But her puzzlement was real. Her tone was that of a bureaucrat being asked to provide a marriage certificate to a hospice patient; she could supply the paper, but she could not really see the point.

"I'm going to drive home," I said at last.

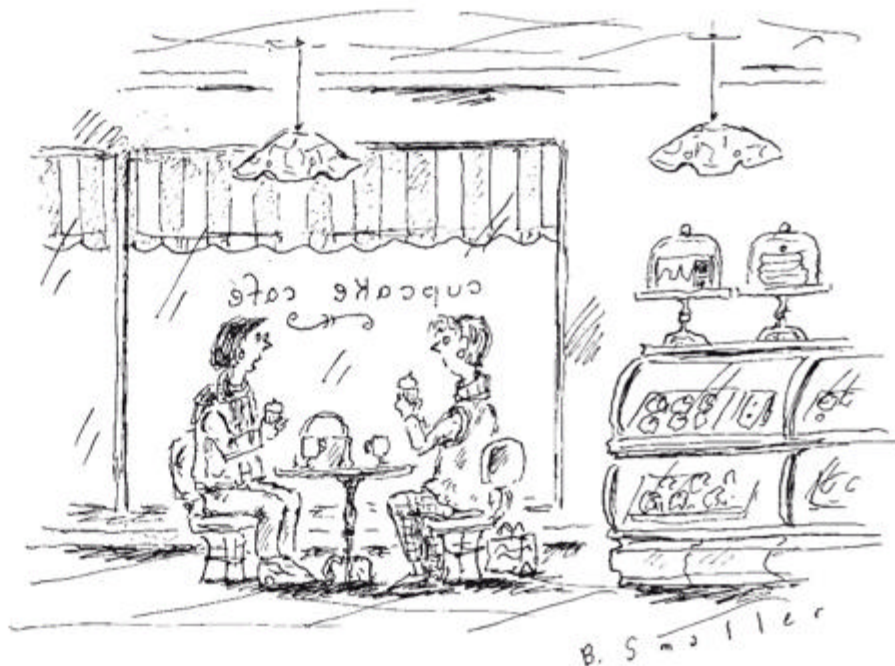
She snorted. There was an odd mixture of hostility and good humor in her conversation—with enough class and race and sexual politics implicit in it to supply several seminar rooms at Luke's liberal-arts college. She had taken my measure within the first ten seconds: no great shakes as a driver, but desperately eager to do well; responsible, if a little ridiculous; no danger on the road to the good people of New York State. It turned out that I had made two mistakes on the road test—taken too wide a left turn, and not signalled when I pulled out from my parallel-parking space. Still, if I was willing to be deferential, she was prepared to be decently tolerant of my absurdity. If I would be the noodle, she would be the sauce.

When I got out of the car, clutching my little piece of paper, Arturo embraced me, and we jumped up and down like a pitcher and catcher after the last out of the World Series. "I knew you could do it! I knew it! I knew it!" He seemed almost as excited as I was.

I called my dad, in Canada. (Luke, of course, got his license one-two-three, just like that.) He was pleased, but didn't seem particularly impressed. "The important thing is that now you know how to drive," he said. "I'm seventy-nine, and I got my license when I was sixteen and I've never had an accident."

Now you know how to drive—the simple monosyllables hovered in the air. Knowing how to drive is part of knowing how to live. Everyone has a role: we yield, scoot, slide, wave, nod, sigh, deny each other space and give each other license. The amazing thing is that, while it sometimes ends up in a horrible pileup, it doesn't *always* end up in a horrible pileup. That's civilization.

I put the license away in my wallet and have not had a chance to use it



*"We're divorced, but we are still friends—friends with lawyers."*

since. We usually expand our capacities without changing our lives. People go off to meditation retreats and come back to their Manhattan existence; on the whole, they are not more serene, but they are much more knowing about where serenity might yet be found. People go to cooking school and don't cook more; but they know how to cook. Dr. Johnson was once asked why he always rushed to look at the spines of books in the library when he arrived at a new house. "Sir, the reason is very plain," he said. "Knowledge is of two kinds. We know a subject ourselves, or we know where we can find information upon it." Almost all of our useful knowledge is potential knowledge.

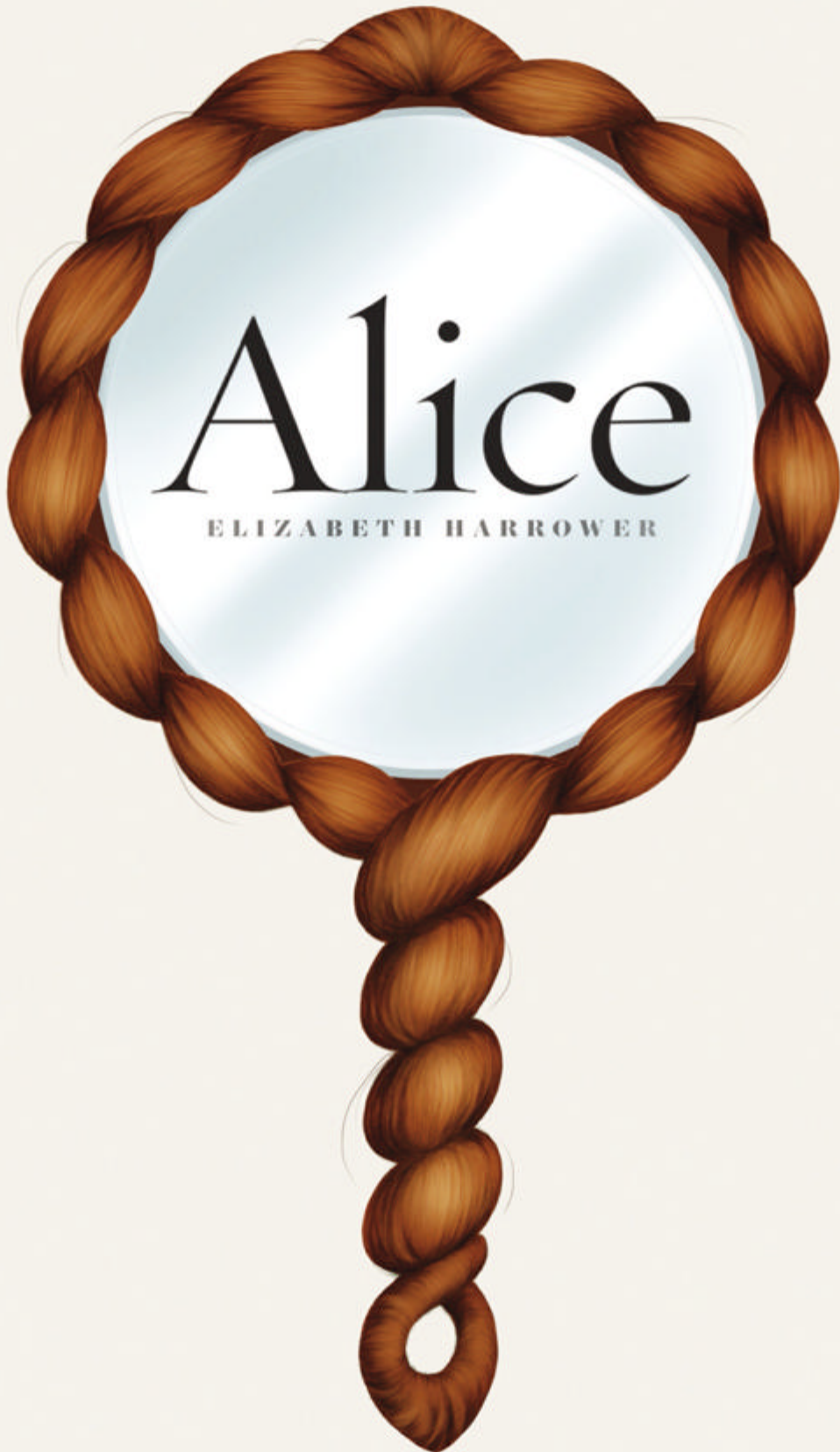
The potentials may serve merely as vicarious experience, but almost all experience is vicarious: that's why we have stories and movies and plays and pictures. It's why we have drive-in movies in summer towns. We expand our worlds through acts of limited empathy more than through plunges into unexpected places. My father's "Now you know how to drive" had wisdom buried in its simplicity. The highlights of life are first unbelievably intense and then absurdly commonplace. I am now a licensed driver. But almost everybody is a licensed driver.

Having a child born is a religious experience. But everybody has kids. Everybody drives, and now I can, too. That's all, and enough. Now I can drive straight across the country, without a stoplight. I don't think I ever will. But at least I know I can.

There is a postscript to the story. My father called in early January to say that, on the eve of his eightieth birthday, he had been forced to take a driving test.

"But it wasn't a driving test—" my mother interrupted, not for the first time in their sixty-some years together.

"I'm getting there," he said, sounding unusually testy with her. It had been a very Canadian test, he explained, a vision examination allied to a reading test, conducted in a friendly spirit—but its dagger end was present. One of the eighty-year-olds tested had had his license taken away, never to drive again. Social life involves being sorted by a few others who have, by the rest of us, been given the power to sort. Our illusion is that it ends on graduation, from one school or another, when one teacher passes us, and then passes us on. But it never really does. We go on being driven and sorted, until at last we're sorted out, and driven home. ♦





She was a little girl with red-gold sausage curls, curls darker than red-gold. She did have this lovely hair. She also had thick creamy skin and gray-blue eyes that wondered. Very young, she read all the stories in which the fairies and the kindest mothers and fathers and the strangers in the woods who were benevolent to lost children said, if not in so many words, "It is good to be good." But, even without the painted finger of the fables pointing in that direction, Alice would have been inclined to be good. Babies arrive with dispositions, and this was hers.

Her mother was Scottish born and bred—irrational, raucous, bony, quick-tempered, and noisy. She had no feelings. She was bright, like anything burning: a match, a firecracker, a tree. Alice was as watchful as a small herbivorous animal. Mother and child were unsatisfied. They looked at each other.

Luckily for the mother, she also had two sons, younger than the girl—golden, milky boys, not made entirely of wood and flames like their mother, nor of guileless life like their sister, but a mixture of both, and somehow not quite enough of either. They were extremely pretty children just the same. Like Alice, the brothers had remarkable hair and eyes, but their great triumph over her was that they were boys. She began to perceive that this, more than curls or thoughtful ways, was what pleased. The question was: Could one terribly good girl ever, in her mother's eyes, equal one boy? And the answer was no.

Alice was a feminine, old-fashioned girl. She neither looked like, felt like, behaved like nor wanted to be like a boy. But she did want her mother to notice her, to be pleased with her, to affirm to everyone, "Alice is here."

The family had come to Australia from the Old Country, bringing old ways. Alice was, for the century or so of her childhood, a nursemaid, nanny, and servant to her brothers. Knowing the weight the boys bore in her mother's mind, she was aged by the responsibility before she was ten years old. If they ran and fell over, dirtied their clothing, cried experimentally or out of bad humor, if they broke any household idols, or in any way irritated their mother, it was all, all Alice's fault. The child began to have doubts.

Sometimes, when Alice was walking down the street, one passerby would say to another, "Did you see that gorgeous hair? What a color!" And she'd wish dreadfully that her mother had been there. The amazing thing, though, was that if her mother *was* there she never heard it. Or if she did hear she didn't understand. Or if she did understand she didn't care. Visitors learned to praise the boys, and not Alice. Even visitors liked to please her mother. It was safer.

Oh, the family had a father. But he went away to be a soldier and was gone for years. When he came back, he was even more silent than before, and the mother indicated that he was of no account. He went to his mysterious work, and spent almost as much time there as he had at the war. When he returned to the house, it was only to eat and sleep. Much later, after the children were all grown up, he died. The day after the funeral, no one could remember his voice.

Meanwhile, the boys swam in attention and praise, and at an early age had had so much that they never needed it again, could afford to discard that particular life buoy and plunge out with a glossy confidence in their qualities. Alice never even learned to dog-paddle. Who would notice if she sank? The deep end was too risky for a girl whose brilliant dark-red curls could be so easily overlooked.

Now and then a teacher or an acquaintance would toss her a few friendly words. Naturally, if she hadn't needed them so badly, she could have collected ten times as many. But she had never heard of supply and demand, wasn't aware of such a thing as a seller's market, and wouldn't have applied it to her own case if she had. Like a solitary bowerbird, she hid these tiny pieces of blue glass around her nest and treasured them, though frequent inspection soon took their color away.

Alice knew only that something was not fair. Here she was, a good girl, a nice girl, pretty to look at, obedient, kind, clever at school, and with beautiful hair—yet none of it was *good enough*. While the boys were somehow perfect. And not because they didn't try but because they never had to. They were welcome when they arrived.

Because Alice's deepest attention, you might even say her soul, was busy

looking back, over its shoulder, she had few acquaintances and no friends. For many years her duties toward the boys, and her strivings to please her mother, took up her whole life. And all this time the mother stayed about the same age; the boys were permanently young, since that was their mother's desire. Only Alice and her father grew old.

One of the boys played the mouth organ and went shooting; the other sketched and painted, and in the interest of his muscles trained at the local gymnasium with a group of amateur boxers. There were photographs of him, gloves raised, head lowered, forehead threateningly wrinkled. There were photographs of football teams in which both boys were illuminated, among all the other hefty thighs and striped jumpers, by their saintly blond heads. On Saturdays and Sundays, they went surfing at the local beaches, taking their girlfriends.

Alice had none of these occupations. She would have liked to take piano lessons, but these were the Depression years, whatever that meant. It was the Depression that made everyone unhappy. Quite possibly her mother might have valued her greatly if it weren't for that. Who knows? (Yet her mother was not unhappy, being herself.) Alice baked little cakes for the boys' picnics, as her mother told her to. Though she never complained, she did feel resentful, baking in the summer heat. Temperatures outside in the shade went over the hundred mark; the heat in the kitchen, with the oven on, was not investigated. Alice fainted sometimes.

The house was always busy with people—"that little Robinson woman" or "that little Fenwick man"—coming to see her mother. They sat upright on the big leather sofa or on the edge of one of the chairs, while her mother marched to and fro hypnotizing them with her enormous effrontery, her energy, her noisy laughter. If the visitors wanted advice of any description, she never hesitated. She was the most positive person any of them had ever come across. Though her opinions were based on nothing but inspiration, and were wrong as often as the law of averages allows, she had the virtue of being certain of everything in uncertain times. The relief of it! The little men and women went away livelier, diverted from their



*"Wow, this new version is a way more immersive waste of our youth."*

troubles, forgetting to sigh for whole blocks as they walked home through the flat suburban streets. (Only the stars were wonderful in that place, but because they were always there they were never noticed.)

Alice's mother told her little men and women about the Old Country. She told them about snow. They had never seen snow, but they were willing to try to picture it. With incredulous half-smiles, they listened to her account of the stuff—so pure, so clean, so cold, the very opposite of everything here. Did it exist? Was there really an Old Country? Their eyes were wistful. They knew it was true. It was just that they couldn't quite believe it.

If the father came in while they were there, he walked straight through the room without a word or a look. Everyone was used to this and thought nothing of it. The mother's vehement talk, her triumphant shouts of laughter, continued without interruption.

No one in that town could have ambitions beyond not being hungry, not being in debt, not being unemployed. Later in life, Alice never found anyone who shared her impressions of her youth and that time. Either she moved in different circles from those she had known then or the others more easily forgot. She remembered everything: crowds of men going nowhere in army-surplus sandshoes and khaki overcoats,

men with swags of dead rabbits for sale, men with small suitcases full of useless items (no more than an excuse to talk), like those small bottles of startling green and red dye that her mother bought. For years, they stood in the pantry. No one knew what they were supposed to be for. Years later still, some of the boys' children found and drank them, watered down, as a test of courage. They didn't die.

Head bent, polishing the boys' shoes or occupied with some other mother-pleasing chore, Alice listened to the travelling men, knowing only that they absolutely could not be turned away. It was her mother's nature to give; she was expansive and generous, though her tongue must often have poisoned the food she distributed so willingly at the back door. No charge could be laid against Alice's mother. She was only herself. The men's pride? Alice's feelings? A good dose of castor oil was what they all needed.

Alice had a little job somewhere. Thin, pale, she ate a banana in the midday heat, thinking of the Old Country and the clean cold. The buildings *there* had stood for generations. *Here* was an enormous expanse on the map but a small black hot place in reality. Four flat black miles in a tram to the coast, through weeds and tumble-down one- and two-story buildings.

The people, her mother often said contemptuously, were like Gypsies. But they were not imaginative or gay, as Alice thought Gypsies might be, only temporary-seeming, accidental, huddling about the masses of steelworks and hotel bars.

And Alice in the midst of this. If her mother could not like her or notice her ever, how terrible! How terrible! Sometimes people made the opening gestures of friendship in the rough style of the district, but often Alice missed them entirely, as a tired person might, for was her mother not holding the floor, making speeches about "my sons, my boys"? At other times, Alice treasured any overture.

"Mr. Wade said to me . . ."

"Sally Grey wants me to go . . ."

No one heard. If she persisted until her mother was forced to listen, her mother's eyes went blank. Or she was actually listening to the races on the radio three rooms away. Or she would talk Alice down with instructions and demands. Because her mother was her mother, and there was no one else, Alice thought she was marvellous.

One day, Alice said, "Eric Lane wants to take me to—"

For the first time, her mother attended, standing still.

Eric was brought to the house, and Eric and Alice were married before there was time to say "knife." How did it happen? She tried to trace it back. She was watching her mother performing for Eric, and then (she always paused here in her mind), somehow, she woke up married and in another house.

Eric was all right, but he was almost as young as she was and knew no more about the world. In fact, he knew less, because this was his birthplace. He had no snowy memories, no castles, no wild cherry trees, no sound stone houses with polished brass and roaring fires, no Halloween, no ghosts or witches, no leg-ends of his own going back to the morning of the world, no proper accent, like the people *there*. At home. Poor Eric had only this empty place where no one belonged, and the Depression, and swimming in the sea with sharks, and sinking and drowning, because who would notice *here*? He liked her hair—but still her mother didn't care.

So Alice was with Eric, being a wife.



Since Eric was an ordinary boy, and she had these extraordinary memories and her extraordinary mother, Alice was sometimes lively and high-handed with him. He told her that girls with her hair color had quick tempers. Alice found a sparky temper. For short periods, she planned a flower garden, or worried about her cooking, or sang. But there was no money, except to pay the rent and buy food. There were no books. There was no person to talk to who understood anything more of the world than she and Eric did. There were only rumors, legends about it. The world sounded like such a strange place. They felt shy.

"We were closer to the Middle Ages than to people now," she said, years later. But that was not it. In those days, only someone like Julius Caesar could have been compared with her mother.

After two or three years, Eric's work took him into the country, where there was no accommodation for wives. And Alice's mother said that she hoped he didn't think any girl of hers was going to rough it in the Australian bush because he was too lazy to get work in town. Gosh! Gosh! Speaking up for Alice! But Eric didn't hold it against her. He thought she was a card, Alice's mother.

Anxious and eager, Alice hovered about her mother's house, still helping with the boys, listening with an inward drooping to endless tales of their exploits. Yet again, she heard about their winning looks; how one of them was known locally as Smiler; how the mother had bought them these expensive garments, that extravagant gadget; how they set about acquiring what they wanted from her—flattering, teasing, kissing, asking, cuddling, demanding, making her laugh.

Alice learned to laugh, too, bitterly. If she said what she thought, her mother's retorts could leave her bleeding, and frequently did. Yet, as soon as the scars had healed, she protested again. Her mother took it that Alice begrudged the boys whatever item they had most recently conjured out of her, and would argue about a piano, or a type of car, till Alice was ready to die. She couldn't say, "We are not talking about pianos or cars!" because she didn't know this. Something about her mother's argu-

ment was murdering her. Ever afterward, she looked at the boys' piano and car with loathing.

From the bush, Eric sent home his money. When he had leave, he came back for a few days. A fair amount of time passed. Then the news all came out in an anonymous letter. Eric had sung a love song to a pretty girl's accompaniment. Eric had slept with the girl. The girl's father was very angry. Alice's mother was very angry. There were meetings and consultations, wild words and tears.

Finally, Alice and Eric moved away from the hideous place with the smoky skies, that hopeless place whose own inhabitants could find no good word to say for it. Now Alice was hours by train from her mother, and there was no money for journeys. Eric was chastened and listless from his joust with experience. Yes, he had sung that love song to the girl in the bush, but he had also shared Alice's snow and, in a way, owned Alice's spectacular hair. It would be nice if she would forgive him, now that they were together. They might go to a dance. He would sing songs to her, too, better songs. He appreciated her cooking. There was some indefinable thing about Alice that he liked so much. She was deep. He didn't understand her. For all these reasons, but particularly for the last, he was willing to love her forever. Oh, Alice!

Eric. He was only a familiar foreigner who looked at her expectantly. She needed to be dazzled.

He was impressed by the strength of her mysterious longings, but he was a follower, too, and two followers together are bound to lose the way. At first, he tried to walk behind Alice, assuming that she knew where they were going. How could he know that she was only trailing her mother, since there was no other leader whose approbation could mean so much? After a while, he began to feel stumped. In his dreams, they wandered hand in hand, but he was no comfort to Alice. She was always looking into the distance, farther than he could see. He was grateful to wake up. Everything was all right, really; it was just that there was a sensation in their small wooden house that, somewhere close by, someone was dying of starvation.

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lines divided Alice and her mother, a new element entered the world: Alice's talent for remaking reality. Her mother—what a martyr to those wicked boys, that silent husband! How free and easy with the neighbors! Anyone could turn to her. And how the boys and their wives took advantage of her good nature! Alice fumed, pale and silent.

Eric asked if she felt O.K. He was rough. The way he arranged his words, awkwardly, with a natural impatience, even when cheerful, would have left marks on Alice if she had cared. Now, when he thought to compliment her in some backhanded way, she looked at him as if he hadn't spoken. As if anything *he* could say . . . As if *his* opinion . . . With no feelings even as strong as sadness or contempt, she overlooked his well-meaning efforts to encourage her. He had no idea. Nobody knew. She didn't even know herself.

It dawned on Eric that Alice had something on her mind a great deal of the time. For all he knew, having something on your mind was natural to women. In other ways, she was a good wife. He liked her hair. He even liked her temper. Once, they had had some fun. Of course, they were getting older, two or three years older. But no one had ever warned him that age could subdue you so fast, so soon.

"The boys are all right. Don't worry about your mother. She's O.K. She wants to give things to them—let her!" Secretly, he was grieved and envious not to receive a share of any bounty that was on offer. But he wore a sturdy front.

"They impose. They're imposing on her. I can stand anything but imposition," Alice would say, damped down.

Letters poured out of her, smoking, in terms she would have been afraid to use face to face with her mother. She called her loving names. She called herself her mother's loving daughter. She advised her mother not to give in to the boys' demands. They were mean and nasty. They were insatiable. She hated them (though she didn't say that).

The letters she received in return were slow to come, short, predictable. Still her hopes lifted daily: a letter would arrive from her mother that would mend her life. If Alice had a fault, dangerous to her survival, it was that she was inordinately reluctant to learn from experience. She would not. Because the lesson would be so sad. And she had spent so much of her life going in the opposite direction from the lesson. And still the lesson pursued her, like a monster through the forest. Of course, it was a hard lesson that not everyone has to learn.

The mother visited from time to time.

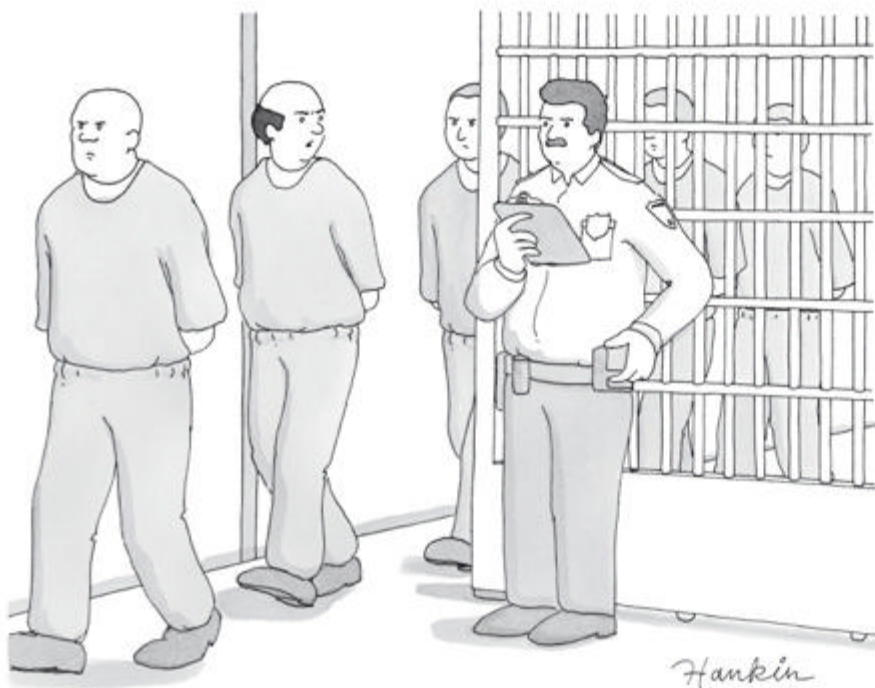
She and Eric jollied each other along. Alice planned for weeks beforehand—everything had to be perfect. Then she could do nothing right. Her ways were different from her mother's, and therefore to be scorned. Sharp laughter, sharper comments, news of the boys rapped out with some exultation. Alice suffered. Her mother laughed. Eric wondered what was going on, and tried a few wisecracks. Then, "It'll all blow over," he would say to one or the other. "She's probably under the weather. Happens in the best of families. Bit of a flareup, then it's all over."

No one took any notice of Eric. He was like a gnat, talking his own language to two large creatures who were enemies, but enemies concerned with each other as they were not with him.

Even yet there were days when Alice's looks and ways were pleasing to others. And she would cling to the gift of their willingness to approve of her. All she would allow herself to think was: I wish there were someone I could tell. Not mentioning any names. Artlessly, she marvelled that people thought they could reach her. They were so separate from her. Why couldn't they understand this?

Years went by. The road where Alice had stopped now stretched far in either direction. She didn't want to follow it. Occasionally, she looked along its length. She stood there with a little crowd of girls and women, all with ravishing red-gold curls. There had been this accident, so long ago that none of them could remember quite what it was. A horrible accident. They couldn't get over it. And, unluckily, no one had ever passed by who understood this, or explained that you could walk away, sometimes, from bad accidents.

Once again, Eric's work took him into the country. He didn't want to go, but he had no choice. While he was there, he slept with another girl, and this time there was a divorce. It didn't really matter, though, because the mother had found another man for Alice, a man who might make more money. He was much older than she was, and very different from Eric—demanding, critical, sarcastic, powerful, brutal. He was like Alice's mother in strength, except that he never laughed. Next to him, Alice's mother seemed better.



*"That's doctor inmate 2264."*



Now Alice's life was truly hard. No one would have believed how hard it was, but, anyway, no one knew. Now there were two who could never be pleased, two who believed that anything could be bought. This did not prevent her, Alice being Alice, from restoring their images nightly with fresh paint and plaster and rearranging their robes in ever more becoming folds.

The dreadful boys went from bad to worse, persecuting her wonderful mother. The man had a lot to put up with, too, with the world not appreciating him as it should. But occasionally Alice still ventured to wish, when a stranger put a field flower in her hand, that there were someone she could tell.

Nothing changed. Neither the mother nor the man nor Alice. The boys deteriorated slightly, receiving one shock after another, when the rest of the population proved less indulgent than their mother. Everyone grew much older. They had all worked hard.

One of the strangers who sometimes talked to Alice now was a girl, a neighbor. Alice's hair was gray. The girl had no mother or father. For five minutes at a time, Alice would listen to stories of the girl's life, and each thought of small helpful things to do for the other. When the man was ill, as he often was now, being quite old, the girl took the trouble to fetch and carry for Alice. Alice returned the good will in more than equal measure: she would never be in someone's debt.

Just the same, this activity was no more pleasing to her than the chirp of a small canary. It was pitiful, in its way, because the girl thought, as had others in the past, that she was really talking to Alice, was friendly with Alice. She didn't realize that Alice had received no sanction for any such behavior from her mother or from the man. What a strange little girl to think that she mattered, when Alice's mother was frail and ill, and the boys were bleeding her of every penny, and she still thought them ideal in their greed and insincerity.

One day, the girl told Alice that she was soon to be married. Alice was dubious about boys, but she met this one and liked him—a country boy with honest eyes. Regularly now, she heard about the wedding. She always listened seri-

ously, and gave excellent advice, much wiser on the girl's behalf than she could ever be on her own.

She was invited to the ceremony and the reception, and would have been mildly pleased to go, but the man was ill. Everything was complicated, as it had always been.

On the wedding day, Alice brushed her hair and looked in the mirror at her sleepless eyes. The latest letters from her mother had complained about Alice and the man in violent terms. They sent presents when she wanted cash to pass on to the ever-hungry boys. Was this complaint fair? Attending to the house and the man, who was ill in bed, drugged, Alice sometimes noticed the clock and remembered what day it was.

At last, the man fed and sleeping again, Alice sat down alone. And then, from the top of the garden path, someone was calling her name, and through the greenery and the late-summer flowers the girl came in her wedding dress and shimmering veil, like a bird or an angel, on her way to the church.

Wonder almost lifted Alice off the ground. Stopping cars, leaving bridesmaids hovering by the gate, the girl floated down. She had thought of Alice, wanted Alice's blessing at this astonishing moment. Everything shone with light—the sky, the garden, the girl in white, and Alice. This was like nothing that had ever happened before. The girl and Alice smiled.

Even after the girl left, in clouds and drifts of white, nothing seemed substantial. A buoyancy, an airiness, something quite amazing surrounded Alice. She had no idea what it was called.

Oh, but she wished, she *wished* that there were someone she could tell. Then, in the middle of this tremendous wish, Alice paused: a great thing was beginning to happen to her. A new thought appeared in her mind, yet Alice recognized it as if it had always been there. The thought said, But *I* know. *I* know.

After this she looked the same, and her circumstances didn't alter, but she was a different person altogether. ♦

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Elizabeth Harrower on "Alice."

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## ELEMENTS

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## ADVENTURES IN ROTHLAND

*"The Humbling" and "Timbuktu."*

BY ANTHONY LANE

It is no surprise that the work of Philip Roth, so easy to swallow on the page, should prove indigestible on film. How do you find a style to match the momentum of his voices—that ceaseless flock of narrators, interpolators, first persons, third persons, and minor figures who roll up, discharge a monologue, and retire from the scene? More to the point, how do you film an exclamation mark? Of the fistful of Roth adaptations that have reached the screen, all have failed, some more gracefully than others. The latest challenger is Barry Levinson, with *"The Humbling,"* based on Roth's short novel of 2009.

With a whole back catalogue to choose from, it is an odd book to plump for, with an oddity for a hero. Simon Axler (Al Pacino) is a famous actor, lately stricken with a fathomless case of the yips. What ails him is not stagefright so much as a failure to comprehend whether and why he should be onstage at all. One solution, which he tries early on, is to fall off the stage, landing nose first at the feet of the folks in Row A. Nervous collapse is diagnosed, and Simon, at the bidding of his analyst (Dylan Baker), and with the blessing of his agent (Charles Grodin), is sent to a sanatorium. Upon release, he holes up in Connecticut, alone but for the visits of a housekeeper. That solitude is broken by the arrival of Pegeen (Greta Gerwig), the daughter of friends, who teaches drama at a nearby college and whom he has barely seen since she was a child. Pegeen is a lesbian, and no one is more

taken aback than Simon when the two of them embark on an affair. One kind of performance begets another, and he moves from bed to boards. The will to act again begins to stir.

All this is strange territory for Levinson, who is no Fellini, nor was meant to be. He is more of an outgoer than a self-inquirer, even when combing through his own past, in *"Diner"* (1982) and *"Liberty Heights"* (1999), and not someone you associate with the probing of creator's block. Yet there it was, in *"What Just Happened"* (2008), where Robert De Niro played a thwarted Hollywood producer, and here it is again, with another stalwart of the *"Godfather"* films recruited to the cause. *"The Humbling"* reveals an ominous gulf between the director and his theme, never wider than when Simon attends group therapy at the sanatorium. At least, it's meant to be a group, and other people are present, but we see little more than the backs of their heads. They certainly don't speak, because Simon does the talking. "I feel like I'm hogging everything here," he says, unabashed, but the true hog is the camera, which dotes on his fallen face, and, by way of a bonus, on his twiddling feet. Imagine what the boys in *"Diner,"* who shared screen time like a roast-beef sandwich, would say. Where does the old guy get off?

Well, this is Rothland, so we know where. In between the sheets lies the arena where bullish senior citizens get to gore and gorge themselves on their lavishly appointed juniors, not so much

to cast aside the years (for that, alas, is unfeasible) as to snort with horny laughter in the countenance of death. David Kepesh clung to that fantastical plan in *"The Dying Animal,"* which was filmed as *"Elegy"* (2008), with Ben Kingsley in predatory pomp. Simon Axler, though, is less cocksure. Indeed, he looks aghast with gratitude merely at being invited to make out with Pegeen, and more resigned than angered when she replaces him, and the batteries of his failing lust, with a vibrator. This leads to the funniest scene, in which the housekeeper applies to a tray of sex toys the same polish and care that she would to hallmarked silver: *"The Double Dog and the fisting mitt, they're going in the washing."*

We could use more gags in *"The Humbling,"* as we could have in *"Elegy,"* which traded the kvetching of the text for a suave legato. The trouble with the new film is that, from the opening shot onward, the tone is set, or half-hijacked, by Pacino. We find him gazing into a mirror, giving us two Als for the price of one, and unburdening himself, at narcoleptic pace, of Jacques's big speech from *"As You Like It."* Cary Grant could have whisked through forty-nine ages of man in the time that Pacino takes to toil through seven, and, should you want to fill the pause that he leaves between *"mere"* and *"oblivion,"* in the penultimate line, you could nip to the lobby, refresh your Coke Zero, and still make it back for the end of the pentameter. The whole thing makes Dustin Hoffman's performance in Levinson's *"Rain Man"* seem like a triumph of underplaying. At least he had Tom Cruise as a counterweight, whereas the fine actors who encircle Pacino here, including Dianne Wiest, as Pegeen's mother, and Nina Arianda, as a deluded fellow-patient from the sanatorium, get to do little more than glance off him. At one point, Gerwig, reading aloud to him in bed, is faded out beneath a surge of music, while our vision is filled once again with a closeup of the main man. He may be a ruin, but the movie bows down to him as if to a totem. What's so humbling about that?

The release of *"Timbuktu"* could not be more timely, although the sad truth is that, nowadays, almost any time would do. The story is set during the occupation of Timbuktu, in Mali,

ABOVE: FRANÇOIS AVRIL





*Greta Gerwig and Al Pacino in a film adapted from a 2009 novel by Philip Roth and directed by Barry Levinson.*

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## CULTURE DESK

TIMELY NOTES ON ARTS AND  
ENTERTAINMENT

"If I have but one rule, it's that critics shouldn't opine on subjects they know nothing about, or use the word 'opine.'"  
—*"I Really Do Hate Top-Ten Lists,"*  
Emily Nussbaum

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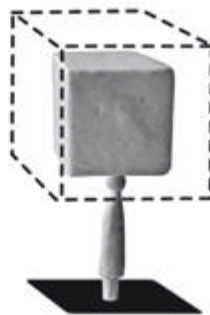
by Islamist forces. This began in April, 2012, and did not end until early the following year, when French and Malian troops retook the city. No date, however, is given at the start of the movie (which has earned an Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Film), and that is a telling omission. The director, Abderrahmane Sissako, is not just leaving us to work things out for ourselves but gently hinting that influx and repression may belong to a deeper pattern—likely enough, in a place that has been captured and liberated many times since its founding, some eight hundred years ago. The city was the subject of an earlier movie, also called “Timbuktu” (1959), starring Victor Mature and Yvonne De Carlo, the poster for which was redolent with thrills: “The Tarantula Desert Torture! The Massacre at the Mosque! The Human Lance-Targets!” Sissako takes a rather different view.

Outside Timbuktu, among dunes, Kidane (Ibrahim Ahmed) lives with his wife (Toulou Kiki) and their twelve-year-old daughter, Toya (Layla Walet Mohamed), on whom Kidane dotes. “I hold nothing in the world dearer than her,” he says. Their existence, in the shade of a capacious tent, is enviably placid; Kidane has many head of cattle, and sufficient hours to lie and strum his guitar. That joy, however, is under threat, for it offends the rigors of the new regime, which is enraged by the spectacle of those who take life easy. We watch an armed figure patrolling Timbuktu with a bullhorn, enjoining residents “not to sit in front of one’s house, to do any old thing, to spend some time in the street”—proof, if any were needed, of just how hard it would have been to impose Sharia law on Robert Mitchum.

We expect Kidane’s story to be the movie’s hearth, but Sissako has a habit of slipping away to observe other characters, as if prowling the rooms of a house. We are introduced to the local eccentric, gaudily dressed, who keeps a pet rooster and bars the passage of militants with her arms outflung; to a beautiful singer, who is arrested mid-song, in compliance with a musical

ban; and to a fish seller who protests the absurd ruling that she, like all women, must wear gloves. It’s no wonder that all these defiant souls are females. They are always the ones with the most to lose.

“Timbuktu” is hard to grasp, as befits the sand-blown setting and the mythical status of the name. The more you try to define the movie, the faster it



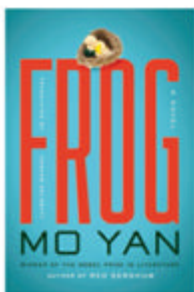
sifts away. Is it, for example, a violent work? Well, one of the first things we witness is bodies under gunfire—faces split wide open, and breasts sheared off. Yet these are bodies of wood and clay: stylized figurines, of the sort that Picasso found so fruitful, and which the Islamists, pre-

sumably, decry. On occasion, Sissako shows damage being done to living flesh, yet even here you sense his powers of discretion. A tussle between Kidane and another man, in the shallows of a lake, is brought to a head by the crack of a pistol, only to be calmed by a twilit long shot of one combatant wading in despair to the farther shore. As for the couple charged with adultery and buried up to their necks, we see only the first stone being cast at their pates, and then the second, before the sequence ends. We know the rest.

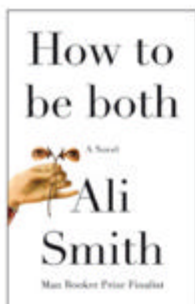
Given such savagery, Sissako might be expected to rail against the freedom crushers, but he is too oblique for that, preferring a cool amusement at their expense. Two of them, seen arguing fiercely about who beat whom, turn out to be discussing not military incursions but Spanish soccer. The levity doesn’t soften, let alone excuse, their brute behavior elsewhere, yet it reminds us that inhumanity, whatever flag it flies, is wrought by regular humans. How fitting, then, that the most decisive moment in “Timbuktu” should also be the quietest: a white-robed imam, seated at the threshold of a mosque, looks at an Islamist who lounges there, with his rifle propped against the wall, and quizzes him about jihad. “Where’s leniency? Where’s forgiveness? Where’s piety?” he asks, in a mild voice. “Where is God in all this?” The fighter has no reply. ♦



## BRIEFLY NOTED



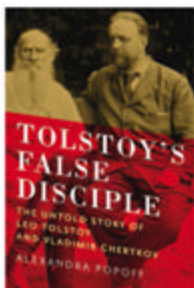
**FROG**, by Mo Yan, translated from the Chinese by Howard Goldblatt (Viking). This satire by a recent Nobel laureate takes aim at Chinese reproductive hypocrisies from the Cultural Revolution to the present, such as the one-child policy and the preference for male offspring. In a village where children are customarily named for body parts, wombs are the unspoken and collective obsession. The narrator grows up in the shadow of his fearsome aunt, a notorious abortionist. Mo relishes the cartoonishly macabre: a drowning woman carrying an illegal pregnancy is pursued by motorboat; a bullfrog farm serves as a front for a surrogate agency exploiting disfigured women. But the characters seem flat, and the novel devolves into a collection of lightly sketched caricatures.



**HOW TO BE BOTH**, by Ali Smith (Pantheon). Language and structure break down in this bracing novel, which juxtaposes two time periods: in one section, a young artist in fifteenth-century Italy paints frescoes at a duke's palazzo; in the other, George, a precocious teen-age girl in contemporary Britain, mourns the loss of her mother. Both stories have at their core powerful coming-of-age narratives, which challenge conventions of historical time and gender roles. "Past or present?" George asks when her mother, in a flashback, poses a moral quandary. "Male or female? It can't be both. It must be one or the other." Her mother, perhaps standing in for Smith, replies, "Who says? Why must it?"



**MODERN MAN**, by Anthony Flint (New Harvest). This biography of Le Corbusier tracks the evolution of the architect and urban planner's revolutionary vision. Born Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris, in Switzerland in 1887, he adopted Paris as his home during the First World War, and assumed his moniker to break with his bourgeois past. Flint's admiration for his subject leads him to heroize and to underplay problematic episodes, such as Le Corbusier's work for the Vichy regime. Still, he catches Le Corbusier's irascible personality well and makes a compelling case for his importance. Le Corbusier championed floor-through apartments, open layouts, and surfaces coated with chalkboard. Rejected at the time, all are now staples of home design.



**TOLSTOY'S FALSE DISCIPLE**, by Alexandra Popoff (Pegasus). After Leo Tolstoy published "War and Peace" and "Anna Karenina," he began producing religious texts and preaching Christianity and nonviolence. He attracted many followers, including Vladimir Chertkov, a Russian aristocrat who became his acolyte, confidant, and publisher. Popoff, who had exclusive access to Chertkov's letters to Tolstoy, constructs a narrative of a toxic, controlling friendship, in which Chertkov manipulated Tolstoy for his own gain and damaged the aging author's fragile relationships with his family. Popoff deftly interweaves archival and secondary sources, but her view of Chertkov as a "foe to creativity," who prevented Tolstoy from completing literary works, seems one-dimensional.

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# SUCH A STOIC

*How Seneca became Ancient Rome's philosopher-fixer.*

BY ELIZABETH KOLBERT



Sometime in the spring of the year 59, the emperor Nero decided to murder his mother. As you can imagine, the two were not on good terms. In a gesture designed to appear conciliatory, Nero invited his mother, Agrippina, to join him at a festival in Baiae, a resort town near present-day Naples. During the festivities, he treated her with great affection. Then, when it was time for her to leave, he presented her with a gift—a beautifully appointed boat to ferry her up the coast.

The gift was supposed to be a death trap. But just about everything that should have gone wrong didn't. The deck of the ship fell in, yet, rather than killing Agrip-

pina, it crushed one of her attendants. The hull, too, had been crafted to break apart; in all the confusion, though, it failed to do so. The rowers tried to overturn the ship. Once again, the effort fell short. Agrippina and a second attendant, Accerronia, swam free. Accerronia—"rather unwisely," as Tacitus puts it—kept screaming that she was Agrippina and needed help. The rowers rushed over and bashed her on the head with their oars. The real Agrippina slipped away. She was picked up by a fishing boat and deposited safely onshore. When Nero learned that his mother had survived, he sent his minions to stab her.

This series of unfortunate events put

the emperor in a pickle. The whole point of the affectionate display and the gift of the boat had been to make Agrippina's death look like an accident. (Even in imperial Rome, matricide was, apparently, bad P.R.) Now this was impossible. And so Nero turned to the man he had always relied on, Lucius Annaeus Seneca, better known as Seneca the Younger, or just plain Seneca.

If poets and philosophers dream of influencing those in power, Seneca was uniquely positioned to do so. He was a celebrated rhetorician, a satirist, the author of several books of natural history, and a playwright. He was also what today might be called an ethicist. Among his many works of moral philosophy are "De Ira" ("On Anger"), "De Providentia" ("On Providence"), and "De Brevitate Vitae" ("On the Shortness of Life"). Seneca had been Nero's tutor since the younger man was twelve or thirteen, and he remained one of his closest advisers.

After the botched boating accident, Seneca set to work. Writing in the voice of the emperor, he composed a letter to the Senate explaining what had happened. Hungry for power, Agrippina had been planning a coup. Once the plot was revealed, she'd taken her own life. As for the shipwreck, that was a sign that the gods themselves had tried to intervene on the emperor's behalf.

At least in public, the response of Rome's elite to the letter was jubilation. Tacitus reports that there was "a marvelous rivalry" among the senators in celebrating Nero's narrow escape; they held games, made offerings at shrines, and proposed that "Agrippina's birthday should be classed among the inauspicious days."

Most of the letter comes down to us in paraphrase, but one line has survived verbatim. It is considered an example of Latin rhetoric at its finest, though clearly it loses something in translation. "That I am safe, neither, as yet, do I believe, nor do I rejoice," Seneca had the newly orphaned Nero declare.

All writers' reputations have their ups and downs. In the case of Seneca, the highs have been very high and the lows pretty low. Early Christians so revered him that they faked an exchange of edifying letters between him and St. Paul. During the Reformation, both

*Seneca was venerated as a moral thinker; he was also one of Nero's closest advisers.*



Calvin and Zwingli turned to his writings for inspiration. Montaigne wrote a “defense” of Seneca, Diderot an essay on his life.

Then Seneca fell out of favor. Among the Romantics, he was regarded as a poor philosopher and a worse playwright. Even his brilliant epigrammatic style was ridiculed; the British historian Thomas Macaulay once observed—epigrammatically—that reading Seneca was “like dining on nothing but anchovy sauce.”

These days, Seneca is again on the upswing. In the past year, two new biographies have appeared: “Dying Every Day: Seneca at the Court of Nero” (Knopf), by James Romm, a classicist at Bard College, and “The Greatest Empire: A Life of Seneca” (Oxford), by Emily Wilson, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania. The two volumes are admiring of Seneca’s talents and, to varying degrees, sympathetic to his pedagogical predicament. Romm and Wilson, both teachers themselves, suggest that Nero was, from the start, a lost cause. But they also acknowledge that this leaves a tricky question unresolved. The letter “explaining” Agrippina’s murder is just one of the ways Seneca propped up Nero’s regime—a regime that the average Julius, let alone the author of “De Ira,” surely realized was thoroughly corrupt. How to explain the philosopher-tutor’s sticking by his monstrous pupil?

Seneca was born around 4 B.C. in the capital of the Roman province of Hispania Ulterior, now the city of Córdoba. He was, it appears, a sickly child and a pampered one. When he was still quite young, he, his father, and his two brothers moved to Rome for the sake of the boys’ education. Presumably, Seneca studied rhetoric, which was the one “R” of Roman education, but in all his extant writings he never mentions this. By contrast, he makes much of his training in philosophy, from a Greek named Attalus.

Attalus was a Stoic, and Seneca became one, too. In his many works of moral philosophy, Seneca consistently maintains that the key to a virtuous life is freedom from passion. Virtue, in turn, is necessary for happiness and also sufficient to produce it. Very little sur-

vives of the Greek Stoics, whom Seneca must have read, but the tradition placed great emphasis on austerity and self-mastery. Seneca praises poverty and argues that the wise man will allow neither joy nor grief to affect him, for both are mere distractions. Such a man, Seneca writes in an essay titled “Of Peace of Mind,” will

go directly in the teeth of Fortune, and never will give way to her. Nor indeed has he any reason for fearing her, for he counts not only chattels, property, and high office, but even his body, his eyes, his hands, and everything whose use makes life dearer to us, nay, even his very self, to be things whose possession is uncertain; he lives as though he had borrowed them, and is ready to return them cheerfully whenever they are claimed.

When Seneca was in his thirties, his writing against “chattels, property, and high office” began to attract admiring notice from those with lots of chattels, property, and high office. Among his rich and powerful friends was Julia Livilla, a sister of the emperor Caligula.

In 41 A.D., Caligula was assassinated and replaced by his uncle Claudius. The new emperor accused Julia Livilla of adultery with Seneca. Whether the two were actually lovers or whether they were just unlucky is not known. (Claudius was, all evidence suggests, less benign than Robert Graves makes him out to be.) Julia Livilla was exiled to an island—probably Ventotene, off Naples—where she died within a few years. Seneca was sent to Corsica.

Most of Seneca’s works can’t be dated; two essays that must have been composed during his years of exile are the “Consolation to Helvia” and the “Consolation to Polybius.” In the first, Seneca addresses his mother, who is heart-stricken over his banishment. Exile, he tells her, is no big deal—basically just a change of address. Wherever we go, he writes, “two most excellent things will accompany us, namely, a common Nature and our own especial virtue.” In the second, he addresses one of Claudius’ top aides, who has recently lost a brother. Polybius should stop grieving, Seneca says, because his brother, like everyone else, was destined to die: “The seven wonders of the world, and any even greater wonders which the ambition of later ages has constructed, will be seen some day leveled with the ground. So it is: nothing lasts forever.”

The two “consolations” are exemplary Stoic works. Both advise indifference toward what might seem, to the untrained mind, terrible misfortunes. But they also betray a certain lack of stoicism. Already in Seneca’s day, Corsica was a spot renowned for its beauty and was home to a community of sophisticated Romans. (A contemporary analogue would be, say, banishment to Martha’s Vineyard.) And yet, Seneca laments to his mother, “What other rock is so barren or so precipitous on every side? . . . Who is more uncultured than the island’s inhabitants?” Even as he consoles Polybius, Seneca makes a point of buttering up Polybius’ boss. As long as Claudius “is safe all your friends are alive, you have lost nothing,” he writes to the grief-stricken brother. “Your eyes ought not only to be dry, but glad. In him is your all, he stands in the place of all else to you: you are not grateful enough for your present happy state . . . if you permit yourself to weep at all.”

Romm and Wilson read Seneca’s posturing as a failed effort to get himself recalled to Rome. Seneca ended up spending the better part of a decade in exile, and he would have spent even longer were it not for one of those episodic mate swaps which make the imperial family tree such a thicket. In 48 A.D., Claudius had his third wife killed and took as his fourth bride Agrippina—Caligula and Julia Livilla’s sister, and Claudius’ niece. It was she who persuaded Claudius to bring Seneca home.

The scheming wife is a fixture of Roman history. As bad as the men are, the women are worse—ruthless, cunning, and often sex-crazed. Many of the stories that come down to us are difficult to credit; for example, before Claudius had his third wife, Messalina, whacked, she was reported to have held a twenty-four-hour sex competition with a hooker. (According to Pliny, she won.)

Agrippina, a classic of the type, was married off at thirteen to Domitian, a notorious creep in his own right. (Domitian, who was three decades older, became Nero’s father.) After Domitian’s death, Agrippina found a new husband, a very rich man, whom, it was rumored, she then poisoned for his estate. She was thirty-three when she wed Uncle



*"Say hello to my little friend."*

Claudius. He already had a son, Britannicus, as well as two daughters. Though a few years younger than Nero, Britannicus seemed well positioned to succeed his father. Agrippina set about promoting Nero ahead of him. She pushed aside (or had executed) anyone loyal to Britannicus and spread the rumor that he was an epileptic.

Agrippina had Seneca recalled nominally so that he could educate the adolescent Nero. (At the back of her mind may have been the model of Aristotle and Alexander the Great.) But she also found other uses for his talents. In 53 A.D., Agrippina arranged for Nero to marry one of Claudius' daughters. A year after that, the story goes, she had Claudius murdered, using a poisoned mushroom. (Tacitus reports that Claudius recovered from the initial poisoning after his bowels "were relieved.") The quick-thinking Agrippina then had him poisoned again, using a feather that was stuck down his throat, ostensibly as an

emetic.) Within hours of Claudius' death, Nero claimed power in a speech to the Praetorian Guard. The speech, which promised the loyal soldiers a huge bonus, was written for him by Seneca.

Claudius' murder set off a round of bloody housekeeping. Anyone whom the new regime perceived as a threat was polished off. Britannicus met his end within six months of his father. This time, the poison was delivered in a pitcher of water. When the boy dropped dead at the dinner table, Nero told the other guests that he was having a fit and they should just keep eating. According to Tacitus, most did.

Britannicus' murder prompted one of Seneca's most famous moral treatises, "On Mercy." The work is addressed to Nero, who is also its subject. Seneca's conceit is that the philosopher has nothing to teach the emperor about clemency; the essay is merely a "mirror" to show the young ruler his own virtues. He is beneficent and kind-

hearted, and can honestly say that he has "spilt not a drop of human blood in the whole world."

Romm and Wilson acknowledge that the juxtaposition of the adulation and the murder looks pretty bad. "On Mercy," Wilson observes, can be read as a sign that Seneca was "willing to praise this violent, dangerous, and terrifyingly powerful young ruler even to the extent of absolutely denying the reality of his behavior."

And what looks even worse is that Seneca grew rich from Nero's crimes. Following Britannicus' murder, the boy's wealth was divvied up, and Seneca, it seems, got a piece. By the end of the decade, the philosopher owned property not just in Rome but also in Egypt, Spain, and southern Italy. And he had so much cash on hand that he loaned forty million sesterces to Rome's newest subjects, the British. (The annual salary of a Roman soldier at that time was around nine hundred sesterces.) The recall of the loans purportedly prompted the British to revolt.

Seneca's fortune made possible a life style that was lavish by Roman or, for that matter, Hollywood standards. According to Dio, at one point the Stoic ordered "five hundred tables of citrus wood with legs of ivory, all identically alike, and he served banquets on them." In an essay entitled "On the Happy Life," composed around 59 A.D., Seneca addresses the strains between his philosophical commitments and his conspicuous consumption.

"Why do you drink wine that is older than you are?" he demands of himself. "Why does your wife wear in her ears the price of a rich man's house?" Seneca's answer, if it can be counted as such, is metaphorical: "The wise man would not despise himself, even if he were a midget; but he would rather be tall." Around the time that Seneca composed "On the Happy Life," a former consul named Publius Suillius had the temerity to accuse him in public of hypocrisy and of sucking the provinces dry. Shortly thereafter, Suillius found himself exiled.

One way to sort out the contradictions of Seneca's life is not even to try. The art critic Robert Hughes labelled Seneca "a hypocrite almost without equal in the ancient world,"



and left it at that. Romm and Wilson—and the new wave of Seneca scholars more generally—resist such reductive judgments. It is possible, in their view, to see Seneca as a hypocrite *and* as a force of moral restraint. In the most generous account, Seneca might even be regarded as a kind of Stoic martyr: to prevent worse from happening to Rome, he stayed on with Nero and, by doing so, sacrificed his good name.

Notwithstanding the murder of Britannicus, the first five years of Nero's reign were an era of relative stability. This period—which the Roman emperor Trajan labelled the *quinquennium Neronis*—matches up almost exactly with the time of Seneca's greatest influence over Nero. After the emperor sidelined his old tutor came, tellingly, what might be called the *novennium Neronis horribilis*—the nine terrible years. During this time, Rome drifted toward chaos as Nero devoted himself to building ever more opulent palaces and competing in the classical version of the Eurovision contest. (Though Nero did not “fiddle while Rome burned,” it's entirely possible that he strummed the lyre and recited poetry as the city was consumed by flames in 64 A.D.)

Seneca's tragedies support a sympathetic reading of his life or, alternatively, just complicate things still further. (We don't know how many plays he wrote; eight of them survive. This is, in itself, remarkable, as only ten Roman tragedies come down to us.) Like the plays of Sophocles and Eu-

ripides, Seneca's dramas are based on myths. But acts that the Greeks discreetly place offstage Seneca brings into full view—Jocasta's suicide, Medea's murder of her children, Atreus' triumphant presentation of the heads of Thyestes' sons. (In Seneca's version of “Oedipus,” Jocasta stabs herself in the womb, which is also, according to Tacitus, where Agrippina asked to be stabbed by Nero's assassins. Whether this is a case of life imitating art or art masquerading as history is impossible to say.) Seneca's plays are so gory that for a long time it was assumed they couldn't have been intended for the stage—the theory was that they were meant to be read or recited like poetry—and even today many scholars consider them unperformable.

The plays are also distinguished—strangely, for a Stoic playwright—by the violence of their passions. The strongest characters in Seneca are, as a rule, the most out of control. “Even if I destroy two sons, still the number is too limited for my anguish,” Medea informs Jason before killing their second child. They operate in a world where redemption is unimaginable and punishment unlikely. As Medea flies off on her serpent-drawn chariot, Jason calls up after her, “Bear witness that wherever you go there are no gods.”

Romm and Wilson interpret the plays similarly. In the tragedies, they argue, myth becomes an instrument for voicing thoughts and feelings it would have been too dangerous for Seneca to express directly. His disgust at Nero's excesses, his guilt over his own collab-

oration, his ambivalence about power and ambition—all are projected onto the House of Atreus. (Romm calls “Thyestes” such a “self-referential” work that he doubts it could have been published while Seneca was alive.)

This reading of the plays makes sense but, as Wilson acknowledges, runs the risk of “circularity”: Seneca's dramas must reflect a hidden moral anguish, because nowhere else in his writings is this moral anguish expressed. Another way to approach the plays is as genre pieces trafficking in the outré—the Roman equivalent of “Reservoir Dogs” or “Django Unchained.” In this reading, what the tragedies reveal is how lightly Seneca took his writings. Plays, treatises, speeches—all were to him just clever phrases strung together, so many “words, words, words.”

Seneca's own tragic end came in 65 A.D., when he was implicated in a plot to assassinate Nero and install in his place a good-looking nobleman named Gaius Piso. (By some accounts, there was within this conspiracy a sub-conspiracy to kill Piso, too, and make Seneca emperor.) The plotters bungled things, and Nero cut them down one after another. To the end, Seneca maintained his innocence, and he may even have been telling the truth. But, as no one knew better than he, truth was not the issue. He was ordered to commit suicide. He cut his wrists, and when that didn't work he tried the veins behind his knees. Supposedly, as he died, he called in his secretary, so he could dictate one last speech. ♦

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VOLUME XC, NO. 46, February 2, 2015. THE NEW YORKER (ISSN 0028792X) is published weekly (except for five combined issues: February 23 & March 2, June 8 & 15, July 6 & 13, August 10 & 17, and December 21 & 28) by Condé Nast, which is a division of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. PRINCIPAL OFFICE: Condé Nast, 1 World Trade Center, New York, NY 10007. Elizabeth Hughes, vice-president and publisher; Beth Lusko, associate publisher advertising; James Guilfoyle, director of finance and business operations; Fabio Bertoni, general counsel. Condé Nast: S. I. Newhouse, Jr., chairman; Charles H. Townsend, chief executive officer; Robert A. Sauerberg, Jr., president; David E. Geithner, chief financial officer; Jill Bright, chief administrative officer. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian Goods and Services Tax Registration No. 123242885-RT0001.

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## CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

*Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Joe Dator, must be received by Sunday, February 1st. The finalists in the January 19th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the February 16th issue. The winner receives a signed print of the cartoon. Any resident of the United States, Canada (except Quebec), Australia, the United Kingdom, or the Republic of Ireland age eighteen or over can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit [contest.newyorker.com](http://contest.newyorker.com).*

### THE WINNING CAPTION



*"Your last job sounds terrible."*  
Nick Kanellis, Brooklyn, N.Y.



### THE FINALISTS

*"Would you at least use coasters?"*  
Ted Olds, Huntington Woods, Mich.

*"The chair has the floor."*  
Joe Guarisco, Candler, N.C.

*"I want a raise."*  
Leif Cussen, London, U.K.

### THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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